

## **Dr. Tremper Longman, God is a Warrior, Session 5, Synthesis of God as Warrior**

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This is Dr. Tremper Longman and his teaching on God is a Warrior. This is session 5, Synthesis of God as Warrior.

Okay, now that we've reviewed the five phases of God's warfare against evil, let's do some reflection on the whole picture.

And the first thing I want to emphasize is the coherence of the biblical picture of God as a warrior. Yes, we've seen different phases, we've in particular seen that there is this transition from physical warfare to spiritual warfare in the New Testament. But it culminates in the book of Revelation with God's judgment against human and spiritual evil.

So, it's not as if there's this transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament that loses sight of God's judgment on us as sinners unless we repent and turn to him. And the reason why I want to start with that emphasis is there's been a lot of recent writing that has tried to divorce the Old Testament from the New Testament on this picture. And I think it's wrong-minded, though I can respect the people who are making this argument, and they're doing it in good faith.

But I think there are some negative consequences that flow from it. Let me make, before I comment a little bit more directly on them, let me also, from a personal perspective, talk about how people have, that as we've thought about this issue of the divine warrior over the past 40 years, there's been a transition in perception. I got started giving papers and writing on the divine warrior theme in 1981, and 1982.

That's more than 40 years ago. Back then, people were interested, but it wasn't a particularly controversial issue among Christians, with the exception of those in the so-called peace churches, like Mennonite scholars who had to deal with the picture of God as a warrior with their concept of violence and pacifism. And I found their writings very helpful, even though I didn't ultimately accept their perspective on pacifism.

But what happened between the early 80s and now is 9-11. When 9-11 happened, people heard fundamentalist Muslims talking about divine violence in a way that reminded them of the Book of Joshua, and that, you can understand, may have disturbed them. But still, we have to address the issue of the ethics of warfare, and I, and I think most of us, will struggle with it to a certain degree.

But here's something I think that's important, even if we personally find something problematic or difficult in scripture, we have to be careful of imposing our own value system on the Bible, and then end up choosing and selecting what we like in the Bible. That's always a danger that we need to avoid. So again, there are certain writers, I'll name some of them, Greg Boyd, who has written a lot on this theme in a work called *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, Peter Enns in *The Bible Tells Me So*, Eric Siebert, and others.

The basic thesis is, that even though the Old Testament describes God as violent, and ultimately, they have to admit, so does the New Testament, we just read Revelation 19, verse 11 and following, which talks about God coming back and bringing judgment as a warrior on all human and spiritual power. Even though the Bible talks about it, they, I have to say, devise ways to sort of rid the Bible of the picture of God as a violent warrior. And the way, for example, Greg Boyd does it, is he says, the most perfect representation of who God is, is Jesus.

And I can certainly agree with that, the scriptures teach that. He goes on to qualify it, and I'll tell you why I think he qualifies it. He just doesn't say Jesus, he says, the perfect manifestation of who God is, is Jesus on the cross.

And so, then he goes on to say, any picture of God in the Bible, which doesn't live up to that standard of Jesus on the cross, is either a result of cultural accommodation, and Enns kind of goes that direction when he says that the Old Testament is Israel. God allows Israel to describe God in terms that they're familiar with, but the depicted God isn't always the actual God. But back to Boyd, he says, either it's a result of cultural accommodation, or he says this, and even though he says he affirms inerrancy, I don't really see how this goes together, but he says, or it's the product of the human author's depraved mind.

And he says that in particular about Deuteronomy 20, when he says, Joshua never should have listened to Moses about the rules of warfare, because he should have known that that's not who God actually is. Among many other problems with that is Moses, Deuteronomy 20 doesn't depict Moses as making this stuff up, it depicts God as telling Moses what to do. Okay, so the other problem is, even though Boyd's principle ends up basically diminishing the Old Testament's witness to God in a dramatic way, but also then, for instance, he turns his attention on Revelation, and he says that the book of Revelation, too, depicts Jesus, but not the Jesus on the cross.

And therefore, there are problems with the book of Revelation's depiction of Jesus. Again, my ultimate evaluation of Boyd's work is that he's approaching the question by looking at the Bible not as a text to be explained and expositied, but rather as a problem to be solved. So, I want to emphasize, again, that there is a coherence in the biblical depiction of God as a warrior from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

It's not as if God got anger management counseling between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament depicts God as loving and just and a judge, and the New Testament depicts God and Jesus as loving, as just, and as a judge. So again, there is coherence here.

I do want to emphasize, though, again, that I've already acknowledged that while there's coherence, there is development, and again, highlight that transition from physical warfare to spiritual warfare today. And it's really, really important that we understand ourselves to be living in phase four, a time of spiritual warfare, not physical warfare, which means that we should never use violence to promote the gospel, the church, or Jesus. And unfortunately, the church has and sometimes still does utilize violence in the name of Christ.

I mean, we could talk about the Crusades, we could talk about the Inquisition, we could talk about the use of Old Testament passages to justify European incursions into Indian land, and so forth. We can talk about how I've heard people who have perpetrated violence against abortion doctors, even shooting them, murdering them, and utilizing violence in the promotion of the gospel. These are all sinful uses of violence and are not in keeping with the divine warrior theme as we know it.

And most of you probably know this passage. It's one of the most famous passages in Paul, but Ephesians 6.10 and following. Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground and after you have done everything to stand.

Stand firm then with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.

Okay, so put on the whole armor of God and fight against the spiritual powers and authorities out there by using powerful weapons like prayer and the spirit and faith and salvation. This battle is not a battle that's won with physical weapons. And here at this point, I want to, as we're being invited into that spiritual battle, I want to go back to the Old Testament and say that there are definite indications of a spiritual battle in the Old Testament.

It's not as if it just starts in the New Testament, but we're being invited into the battle for the first time. And I'm thinking here off the top of my head of a couple of places. One I mentioned earlier, was the plagues against Egypt.

And I want to start at the end when on the eve of the death of the firstborn, God says this, on this day, I will have victory over the gods of Egypt. And then I want to remind you that early on in the story, the Egyptian magicians are able to mimic some of the signs and wonders like turning water into blood and turning rods into serpents. But then their power runs out.

So, what is being referred to as the gods of Egypt? I would say that these are the evil demonic spiritual powers and authority that are behind the human battle. And scholars have suggested that the plagues are actually tailored in such a way that they're attacking specific conceptions of Egyptian gods. Whether it's turning the Nile into blood, where you have a god of the Nile who's a god of fertility named Hapi.

Or dramatically, the darkening of the sun, where the sun god, who goes by various names, is one of the chiefs, if not the chief gods of the Egyptian pantheon. These are seen as victories over these gods. So, there's a spiritual battle going on behind the human struggle.

And then one more passage is found in Daniel chapter 10. And this is the beginning of the fourth and final apocalyptic vision that Daniel presents to us. It begins, In the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel, who was called Belteshazzar.

Its message was true, and it concerned a great war. The understanding of the message came to him in a vision. At that time, I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks.

I ate no choice food, no meat or wine, touched my lips, and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over. Then on the 24th day of the first month, I looked up, and there before me was a man dressed in linen. And we will soon understand, as the description goes on, that this is a divine messenger, an angelic figure.

And he later explains why it took him a while to get there. Remember, Daniel's been waiting three weeks. Verse 12, says, Do not be afraid, Daniel, since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God.

Your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me for twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me because I was detained there with the king of Persia.

Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future. So, we know that Michael is the angel that is most closely connected with Israel, who comes and helps. But almost certainly Gabriel reached Daniel, but fighting his way through what I would call the spirit prince of Persia.

So, there's a spiritual battle going on behind the human one and Daniel. And at the end of the chapter, Gabriel will say, and now we have to go fight the spirit prince of Greece. So, there's a spiritual battle going on in the Old Testament.

But again, Daniel's not being invited into that battle in the same way that we are being invited into the spiritual battle. And that spiritual battle can take many forms. One can be, you know, fighting against injustices in our world.

Another one can be the act of evangelism because as we go out and share the gospel, you got to be careful with this language. But Paul uses the language of when somebody becomes a Christian, the old person dies and the new person rises up. So, you have to be careful with that language so it doesn't lead to a coercive form of evangelism.

But the more people who become Christians, the more damage that's done to the evil spiritual powers kingdom. And then finally, there's a battle going on inside of us as well. I'm thinking here of a passage in Romans chapter 7, which talks about the struggle that we have to not sin.

And so, it's a long passage. I'll pick it up in verse 14. We know that the law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.

I do not understand what I do, for what I want to do, I do not do. But what I hate, I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good as it is.

It is no longer I myself who do it, but it's sin living in me. For I know that the good itself does not dwell in me, that is in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

For I do not do the good that I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do, this I keep doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it's sin living in me that does it. So, I find this law at work.

Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being, I delight in God's law. But I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

What a wretched man I am, who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death. Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then I

myself, in my mind, am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature, a slave to the law of sin.

Now I'm aware there's a debate over whether this is describing somebody before they were a Christian or after they were a Christian. I don't know about you, but I have those struggles in my own heart with sin. And so, I can call upon my divine warrior to help me have victory over that sin.

So, I think Paul's battle language is very appropriate. So still, there is this question of the ethics of the Old Testament violence against flesh and blood enemies of Israel. And it's a difficult question, particularly when it comes to the idea of herem, and the complete destruction of cities, including its inhabitants, men, women, and children.

We know that it was never fully carried out, but it led to the consequences that God warned about, which is that the Canaanite peoples corrupted the thinking of many Israelites. So, they ended up worshiping Baal and committing sins and so forth. But still, it's an extremely difficult question.

But I do want to say that in a day like our day, where we're very concerned about justice, seeing people get the punishment that they deserve for their crimes, that really what we're talking about here is a matter of God justly punishing people for their sins. And I found really helpful a reflection by Miroslav Volf, now a longtime professor at Yale and before that at Fuller Theological Seminary, who grew up in what used to be called Yugoslavia, which was wracked by warfare between Serbs and Croats. And notice how this helped him understand the picture of God we get in the Bible.

He says this, I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them.

My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3 million were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed.

My people shelled day in and day out. Some of them were brutalized beyond imagination. And I could not imagine God not being angry.

I think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in 100 days. How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandfatherly fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath, but instead reaffirming the perpetrators' basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I

came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love.

God is wrathful because God is love. Again, I don't think that solves all our problems with the Divine Warrior theme, but it certainly, I think, is an important perspective that we should have on the biblical picture. I also want to talk a little bit about how we ought to think of the warfare in the Old Testament as an anticipation of the Final Judgment.

As, if you will, a preview of the Final Judgment that God gives us to warn us about the Final Judgment. And what I mean is this. A teacher of mine in the past, Meredith Klein, described what I'm about to talk about as an intrusion of end-time ethics into the period of common grace.

By common grace, theologians mean that God doesn't separate the wheat from the chaff in this life. That good things happen to bad people. Bad things happen to good people.

But the biblical picture is that everybody will get what they deserve in the afterlife. So, what he says, though, is that something like the conquest is an intrusion of end-time ethics. It's kind of a preview of the kind of judgment that will come on people who continue to reject, resist God, work against God, hurt other people, who don't turn to Jesus.

So again, I think that's a legitimate way to think about these Old Testament texts. So, I hope this survey has been helpful to you to see the wide scope and development of the Divine Warrior theme in Scripture. And again, it runs from Genesis 3 all the way to the end of Revelation.

And so, it's an important theme for us to understand, for us to know how it applies to our lives, and what it tells us about God. We started this session by talking about the multiple metaphors that are used to describe God to us. And no one of them captures anything close to the whole picture.

But it is an important part of that picture, as we consider it along with the fact that God is our Father, God is our King, God is our Husband, and on and on and on. So I commend you for the study of these important metaphors of who God is. This is Dr. Tremper Longman in his teaching on God is a Warrior.

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