

A Missiology of Disease

By Ralph D. Winter, with Beth Snodderly

A Summary of the Biblical Theme of Cosmic Battle

The Bible consists of a single drama: the entrance of the Kingdom, the power, and the glory of the living God in this enemy-occupied territory. From Genesis 12 to the end of the Bible, and indeed until the end of time, there unfolds the single, coherent drama of “the Kingdom strikes back.”

This would make a good title for the Bible itself were it to be printed in modern dress (with Gen 1–11 as the introduction to the whole Bible). In this unfolding drama we see the gradual but irresistible power of God reconquering and redeeming His fallen creation through the giving of His own Son at the very center of the 4000-year period ending in 2000 CE. This is tersely summed up: “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).

This counterattack against the Evil One clearly does not await the appearance of the good Person in the center of the story. Indeed, there would seem to be five identifiable epochs of advance prior to the appearance of Christ as well as five after that event. The theme that links all ten epochs is the grace of God intervening in a “world which lies in the power of the Evil One” (1 John 5:19), contesting an enemy who temporarily is “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4) so that the nations will praise God’s name. His plan for doing this is to reach all peoples by conferring an unusual “blessing” on Abraham and Abraham’s seed (Abraham’s children-by-faith), even as we pray “Thy Kingdom come.”

By contrast, the Evil One’s plan is to bring reproach on the Name of God. The Evil One stirs up hate, distorts even DNA sequences, perhaps authors suffering and all destruction of God’s good creation. Satan’s devices may very well include devising virulent germs in order to tear down confidence in God’s loving character. All over the earth people are dying prematurely in suffering and pain due to an onslaught from the microbiological world that we are only beginning to understand and that has not been understood theologically.

Today our God is being blamed for all kinds of evil. When people get sick, whether in Africa or in California, they commonly assume “God did it” for some unknown reason. That misunderstanding does not glorify God. A missiology of disease recognizes that God is not the author of the destructive violence in nature but has long sought our help in bringing His kingdom and His will on earth. We need to recognize the very radical and significant decision of God to create beings, angelic and human, with true free will and to work through those intermediaries.

Christ has called us not merely to witness but to be salt and light in a world of evil, corruption, and disease. A missiology of disease recognizes that fighting disease, even to the point of eradication, is part of a cosmic battle against the works of the devil that God has invited believers to join alongside the Son of God who came to earth for the purpose of destroying the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). What would Jesus have said about fighting germs in the name of God had the people of his time know about germs? Not even Luther and Calvin knew about destructive germs, thus our theology (unchanged from the sixteenth century) ignores that whole swath of the works of the devil. To destroy

the works of the devil is one major way in which our testimony of word and deed can glorify the true nature of our living God, our loving heavenly father. It is not an alternative to evangelism, it will make our evangelism more credible. It is to rectify our God's damaged reputation. It is to avoid extending the implicit and embarrassing policy of almost constantly misrepresenting Him in our mission work around the world. Attacking the roots of disease is part and parcel of our basic mandate to glorify God in all the earth.

Misunderstandings about the Bible, God's Will, and God's Character

In this mandate to glorify God by representing God's character we must consider these questions:

- Does God send disease or does God want to do away with it?
- How does attributing disease to God affect God's reputation?
- Will people want to follow a God they believe punishes them with disease?
- How do we reconcile the differing Old and New Testament viewpoints?

It is a very perplexing question of how the New Testament is different from the Old Testament. Misunderstandings about God's character and God's will can arise from misunderstanding the nature of biblical revelation. Some may point to accounts in the Old Testament that indicate the people of Israel believed God sent disease as punishment for wrongdoing. For example, in Genesis 12:17, "the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai." However, very few people today understand the Bible to be a continuous story of developing insight on the part of a people God was teaching. It took 2000 years for some ideas to become relevant. I feel it is important to acknowledge that our Christian Bibles reveal many evidences of having incorporated perspectives from outside the Abrahamic genetic lineage. God did not just wave a wand and take his people from 4,000 years ago into the present without any transitional periods in between. If we believe that, we are unfair to the Bible itself. The Bible—as it stands—is an inerrant record of God that portrays the progressive impact on a given nation (Israel) of His will.

And we can't read just one part of the Bible—that's just one part of the story. We need to see the whole story, and where it's going. And the fact is that while in the Old Testament Satan is only referred to a couple of times, in the New Testament Satan is referred to more than a hundred times.

Once Satan is in the picture (if we believe he is) no amount or kind of harsh or heartless evil should be unexpected in any quarter. "The devil . . . was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44); "do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother" (1 John 3:12). Right from the beginning of his ministry Jesus engaged in the cosmic battle with the devil and amazed people with the authority he had over demonic behavior, including disease:

"Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was" (Mark 1:34; also see Matt. 4:23, 24; Luke 4:40, 41). In the New Testament, deliverance from disease is a sign of the "good news" of the Kingdom of God. "Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people" (Matt. 4:23). Luke reports that as the crowds followed Jesus, He "welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of

God, and healed those who needed healing” (Luke 9:11). This is what God’s will and loving character looks like.

The seeming contradictions between the Old and New Testament views are resolved when we take into account that Jesus is the full representation of God’s character; he is the complete revelation of God’s will, which is diametrically opposed to the murderous character of God’s adversary. “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3).

The Devil’s and Demons’ Role in Disease

The Old Testament view of attributing disease caused by microbiological evils (such as leprosy or plague) to God’s punishment for sin, sounds a lot like some contemporary Christian views of disease, and for the same reason: there is no Satan in the picture. Both views put the blame on the person who is suffering or on God because they do not recognize the devil and demons as the source of illness. Our current theological literature, to my knowledge, does not seriously consider disease pathogens from a theological point of view—that is, are they the work of God or Satan? Much less does this literature ask the question, Does God mandate us to eliminate pathogens?¹

I am aware that only in recent history have humans recognized that most sickness is due to ingenious, invisible, deadly forms of intelligent life. Our forefathers who were the caretakers and creators of our theology—our Calvins and Luthers, Augustines, and Aquinases—were unaware of the microscopic world. Therefore, they had no opportunity to decide whether germs brought a great shadow on the glory of God, or, thus, whether fighting those destructive entities would be a significant means of glorifying God. But what if all disease pathogens as well as all violent forms of life are the work of Satan? What would Jesus have said about fighting germs in the name of Christ had the people of his time know about germs? How would that amplify and refocus our global mission?

To me the most profound issue facing missions today is the current absence of a concept of an adversary in our theology of church life and mission. The “works of the devil” would seem to include the perversion of the very structure of life at DNA levels. The discovery of thousands of defective genes in the human genome is possibly evidence of demonic activity at the DNA level. Even the violent traits of animals and man may exhibit the same kind of distorting influence at that level.

My pastor used to say that “Satan’s greatest achievement is to cover his tracks.” That, surely, is why we get out of practice speaking of him or recognizing his works or even recognizing his existence. Yet, when we reinstate his existence as an evil intelligence loose in God’s creation, only then do a lot of things become clear and reasonable. Otherwise God gets blamed for all kinds of evil: “God took my wife,” etc. I find it difficult, after making this switch, not to conclude that Satan’s angels are the source of life-destroying forms of life, vicious animals, bacteria, viruses. Not that he created them but that he tampered with their DNA to distort them. To “destroy his works” means thus to take it as part of our efforts, our mission to glorify God, to restore, with God’s help, what Satan has distorted.

Fighting Disease Is Part of the Mandate to Care for Creation and to Take It Back from the Rulership of the Devil

The Genesis mandate to man to care for life and creation (Gen. 1:28) would thus seem to include serious human efforts in collaboration with God to restore (to redeem) all perversions of disease or violence in the various forms of life. All creation groans and strains according to Romans 8 waiting for its redemption. But if we talk about redemption we have to talk about restoration of creation; you can't just talk about a ticket to heaven in the pocket of human beings. It is as though to escape this world is more important than to restore God's glory through the conquest of the destructive and distorting elements of Satanic fury against God. Getting human beings redeemed is not the end, it's the beginning. The advance of the Kingdom consists not merely of the rescue of humans but includes the restoration of a corrupted creation and the defeat of the Evil One. Once restored in repentance and faith, in the blessing of God, redeemed man is now expected to resume his original purpose, to work with God for the restoration of all creation, and in the process make crystal clear that Satan and not God is the initiator of evil and depravity.

But for most evangelicals there is a massive "disconnect." We can clearly see a monstrous, pervasive distortion in creation, but we don't realize how illogical it is to blame all that on God, as some do. We need a closer study of the Book of Creation to discern the difference between the beauty God put there and the violence and gruesome cruelty Satan has put there. Our disconnect from the reality of Satan's work blinds us to the theological significance of the corruption of all creation. By corruption of creation we must recognize genetic damage (not just "defects") both before and after conception, terribly hostile pathogens, viruses, bacteria, parasites, wild animals, as well as warlike and genocidal humans. The corruption of creation by intelligent evil has turned the story of our planet into the story of a battle. Unfortunately, there is a widespread blindness to the corruption of all creation and our responsibility to restore it.

The divine response to this corruption was a plan to defeat The Evil One, restore creation, and reclaim all the peoples of the earth. A principal means for this is the redemption of man through a chosen nation, on the basis of "the lamb slain before the foundations of the world." As Abraham's children, we have inherited the family responsibility of God's concerns and purposes which are to become our concerns and purposes. The Abrahamic "blessing" is a key concept. It was not "blessings" but "a blessing," the conferral of a family name, responsibility, obligation, as well as privilege. It is not something you can receive or get like a box of chocolates you can run off with and eat by yourself in a cave, or a new personal power you can show off like rippling muscles. It is something you become in a permanent relationship and fellowship with your Father in Heaven. It returns "families," that is, nations, to his household, to the Kingdom of God, so that the nations "will declare his glory." But the nations are being prevented from declaring God's glory by the scarcity of evidence of God's ability to cope with evil. If the Son of God appeared to destroy the works of the devil, then what are the followers and "joint heirs" of the Son of God supposed to do to bring honor to his name?

Missiological Implications: Fighting Disease Helps Glorify God by Displaying God's Character and Rectify His Damaged Reputation

We will have a much-empowered gospel if we accept our mandate to restore creation and restore God's glory. It crucially enlarges our understanding of the devastation of Satan's ongoing activities in distorting creation and thus tearing down

God's glory. It therefore requires a larger presentation of the gospel to unreached peoples which lack prior contact with the Old Testament. It defines a larger mission of not just getting people out of this world safely into heaven, but that of getting redeemed people to turn around and fight along with him against "the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8).

I would think we would speak of four levels of strategy and purpose:

Level 1: Getting people "saved"

Level 2: Winning them to the lordship of Christ and into his family

Level 3: Glorifying God

Level 4: Distinguishing evil from God and fighting "the works of the devil" as a means of glorifying God, that is, understanding the lordship of Christ as involving us in an all-out war against evil, disease, corruption—a war in which we can expect suffering, hardship, and death.

Some will say, "What in the world could microbes have to do with the Kingdom of God or global evangelism?" The answer is simple. Distorted microbes war against the Kingdom of God. Distorted genes make animals violent and destructive. Destructive parasites kill off many varieties of plant and animal life, as well as, by the malarial parasite, 1.2 million people a year, most of them children—four of whom die every minute from malaria alone. All this massive damage to the purposes of the Kingdom of God amounts to noise so loud that people can't hear what we are preaching to them.

If we are to glorify God, is it not essential to free him from the accusation that he, not Satan, is the author of evil? How attractive is our invitation to people to return to and yield to their Father in heaven if they continue to believe that he is the one who contrives for most everyone to die in suffering? Unless Satan is in the picture and we are known to be fighting his deadly works, we are allowing God's glory to be marred and torn down.

The assumption of some people seems to be that the advance of the Kingdom consists merely of the rescue of humans, not the restoration of a corrupted creation and the defeat of the Evil One. But getting people delivered from Satan isn't the main point. Rather, getting creation delivered from Satan. Saving human beings is only part of the restoration of creation. It is a very important part, if for no other reason than both good angels and redeemed people are part of the process of beating down the gates of hell. The principle concern of the Bible is God and his name. The destruction of his will is the problem.

We have a mandate to restore the glory of God among all peoples by more adequately representing His character. We misrepresent him if we talk only about getting to heaven. We must also reveal by our actions his concern for the conquest of evil and evil disease. While Christians are noted for being kind to people who are already sick, curiously and ominously, to this day, Christians are not well known for fighting the viruses, the bacteria, and the tiny parasites that cause illness. The fact that Jesus did not talk about germs—which not even Calvin and Luther knew about—does not mean that He wants us to be silent on that subject today. It is common today among many Evangelicals to be content with the first century understanding of nature. But the challenge for us today is to discover what Jesus would have said had the people known what we know today about germs.

A major challenge faces anyone who lives in the age where we can actually see tiny parasites like malaria in microscopes and we can trace the four very clever stages of their attack on the human body. We have even noticed their insidious change in their

human hosts to make the bodies of those infected attract more mosquitoes so their infected blood can be transmitted to still more victims. I point this out simply to illustrate the extensive difficulties in understanding for our day what Jesus wants to say to us if we merely focus on what he said in the first century. With increased insight into the works of the devil we have an increased span of responsibility. Our Christian mission becomes different and larger. In other words, would Jesus have said that germs are one of the works of the devil which he and his followers are to set out to destroy?

We are willing to fight back at visible human muggers but not invisible bug muggers! That is, our pre-germ theological tradition does not trace disease back to the work of an Evil One. Thus, to my knowledge there is not a single avowedly Christian institution on the face of the earth that is working specifically for the eradication of disease pathogens. The medical and pharmaceutical industries draw their support from sick people who want help in getting well, and who are not paying for research at the roots of disease. To patch up people who suffer heart disease patients in this country alone those patients pay almost \$1 billion per day. Yet virtually none of that money goes to the study of the long-suspected viral source of heart disease. Is this a blind spot in the spectrum of God's mandate to us in mission? I think so.

Conclusion

If someone on the mission field who has never heard of the Bible were to read the Gospels for the first time, they would clearly get the idea that the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven), is the main subject—not in the sense of “how to get to heaven” but how the power, the rule, the authority of God—of Heaven—can get to earth, how his will can come on earth as it is in heaven. We misrepresent God if we talk only about getting to heaven. We must also reveal by our actions his concern for the conquest of evil and disease. When souls are saved they are not merely supposed to be survivors singing of their salvation, but soldiers deliberately choosing to enter into the dangerous, sacrificial, arduous task of restoring the glory of God for all to see. “Let your light shine in this way: that your good deeds may be seen by men who will thus be able to glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). I do not think that the world is going to get better and better until Jesus comes to congratulate us on our accomplishments, but I do think he expects us to work toward that end, whether it is attainable or not, as a means of glorifying his name and empowering our evangelism. What rings in my ears is the phrase in the parable, “occupy 'till I come” (Luke 19:13).

If Jesus had just gone around and urged people to wait out the next world, the Gospels would have been very different from what they are. Jesus challenged every kind of evil. There is a large array of diseases from smallpox to SARS to Guinea worm to river blindness to tuberculosis to dengue fever which we have to go out and slay. The healthiest immune system will not guard you against malaria. Once we remove our religious glasses that seem to see everything in terms of how we can have our sins forgiven and get to heaven, we can begin to glimpse an almost entirely new scene in which the issue is not so much salvation as mainly service, that is, what we do after we get forgiven. In fact, Jesus actually said, “he who seeks to save his life will lose it and he who will lose his life for me will save it” (Luke 17:33).

If we can properly re-contextualize our faith at this time, we will no longer need simply to trust that in God's sovereign purposes there are good things even when things

go wrong. We can both recognize the truth of that and also work against the causes of evil and suffering. In that case we are free to understand that God is expecting us to join in that effort. Jesus said, “As my Father sent me, even so send I you” (John 20:21). Isn’t that clear?

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Footnote:

¹ Since Ralph Winter's death, pastor-theologian Gregory Boyd has been explicit in attributing disease pathogens to the devil's work. "Parasites, viruses, diseases. ... are ... the result of Satan and forces of evil corrupting the creative work of the benevolent Creator" (Boyd 2009, 138). "When [scientists] discover ways to fight diseases and discover their origins, that is spiritual warfare" (Boyd 2011, 293).

The COVID-19 disease situation prior to October 2020 in selected countries: the potentially severe consequences of COVID-19 on the nervous system and several key solutions to COVID-19 in relation to digitization and artificial intelligence. Jan Masan, Miron Sramka, Ana Sabo, Dagmar Kalatova, Jerzy Rottermund, Eugen Ruzicky, Vladimir Krcmery.

Rheumatic diseases affect your joints, tendons, ligaments, bones, and muscles. Among them are many types of arthritis, a term used for conditions that affect your joints. Sometimes they're called musculoskeletal diseases. Common symptoms include: Joint pain. Loss of motion in a joint or joints. Inflammation -- swelling, redness, and warmth in a joint or affected area. Doctors aren't sure what causes this. Sometimes it's in your genes. Other times it's a result of something in the world around you, like cigarette smoke, pollution, or something that causes an infection. Gender also plays a role -- rheumatic diseases seem to affect women more than men.

What to Expect When You Have a Rheumatic Disease.

- **Osteoarthritis (OA).** The other ways this disease spreads to animals or humans is through direct contact to any infected animal and through animal bites. It may also take the form of airborne disease (pneumonic plague), which makes it even deadlier than its other forms.

Symptoms.

4. Symptoms start showing up after the incubation period of about 3 to 7 days. Lyme disease is a tick-transmitted infection caused by the spirochete *Borrelia* species. Early symptoms include an erythema migrans rash, which may be followed weeks to months later by neurologic, cardiac, or joint abnormalities. Diagnosis is primarily clinical in early-stage disease, but serologic testing can help diagnose cardiac, neurologic, and rheumatologic complications that occur later in the disease.

In the US, Lyme disease is caused primarily by *Borrelia burgdorferi* and to a lesser extent by *B. mayonii*, which has recently been found in the upper midwestern states. In Europe and Asia, Lyme disease is caused primarily by *B. afzelii*, *B. garinii*, and *B. burgdorferi*. Onset is usually in the summer and early fall.