

Space, Time, Matter (Perfect Storm Series)

The last time a major world war was fought, the main instruments of destruction were planes dropping bombs, tanks, submarines, missiles and, of course, the atomic bombs that ended it all. When people from my generation think about warfare we think of fighter planes, destroyers, tanks and artillery and lots of bombs.

But what if the nation you were attacking had far more ships and planes and tanks than you do, along with sophisticated defense missiles and submarines in every ocean on the planet? What would you do then? In 2001 Osama bin Laden spent about a half a million dollars to fly planes into the World Trade Center towers in New York City. It wasn't a war, but it was a devastating attack on the American psyche. And, it has gone a long way to achieving bin Laden's stated goal which was to bankrupt America.

What it points to is the possibility that future wars won't be anything like the previous ones, that they may be fought on a different battleground with different weapons and with far different goals. Look at this map. Each of those coloured lines on the map represents an undersea cable. A lot of people think that when their email gets lost in cyberspace, that it is missing somewhere between earth and satellite. The reality is that satellites handle only a few messages. Over 90% of the world's internet connectivity is dependent on submarine cables, cables that are under water, cables that may be less than 10 cm. in diameter. A week or two ago, a ship's anchor cut through two of these cables near Alexandria, in Egypt, and 75% of Asia's internet connectivity was lost. Will a future battle for power see this kind of vulnerable system under attack, with massive communications problems for a country that is isolated by these attacks.

Also this month, the Wall Street Journal came out with this map to accompany a story about American electric power. They reported on a study by a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission that told how the three U.S. electricity grids, Western, Eastern and Texas, could be put out of commission by attacks on only 9 substations. The scary part? They said that 9 attacks on select stations and one transformer manufacturer could keep all the United States without power for at least 18 months, probably longer.

The report was commissioned after two men broke into a power substation in San Jose last April and shot up 17 transformers in less than 20 minutes. They were able to escape undetected because they first cut the fiber optic cables that handled phone calls out of the station and it took awhile to get word to police.

And, every day, large U.S. banks are being bombarded by computer hackers, mostly originating in China. Some of the best hackers in the world are from the Ukraine and from Russia, so you can imagine what's going on between those two nations. But there is potential for hackers to knock out nuclear power plants, hydro-electric dams, transmission stations, etc. etc. It seems quite certain that hackers from either Israel

or the U.S. have disrupted the Iranian nuclear program from thousands of miles away and others may have destroyed the turbines in a hydro plant in Russia last year by sending the wrong signals, although there are other more likely causes.

Just as World War II was fought in a much different way than the first World War, so future wars may be more about undermining communications and energy, about destroying a nation's economic health, than sending in massive numbers of troops or missiles or bombs.

The world is constantly changing and, because of that, we can hardly imagine the world that Jesus lived in, and the elements that influenced the actions at the end of His earthly ministry. But we're going to try.

What do you think when you hear on the news that some First Nations group is angry about negotiations on land claims? Do you ever wonder why it's hard to figure out how many square miles to give them or why there are such hard negotiations over certain areas? One of the reasons is that we have no conception of 'sacred space' any more. Real estate is just land that can be subdivided, built on, walked through and we don't understand the sense of place that was so real to the Jews of Jesus' day.

We also have lost the conception of special time. When I was growing up you couldn't shop on Sundays because there were no stores open. The last dominoes to fall were the banks who started opening on Sundays just a few years ago. Now, there is no day that is particularly different from any other day, except Christmas where pretty much everything closes down. There is little concept of season -- such as advent or lent -- just rain or sunshine, work days or days off.

We also have a different view on matter than was held by people in the ancient world. To us it's all just stuff, and some of it is useful and some is not. Imagine living in a world where God was actively involved in moving matter around, filling it with significance, using it to show His power and glory. People in our day are typically more comfortable with David Hume's argument that miracles don't happen because they can't happen -- but that is not the world view of first-century Judea, as we will see.

Space. For many centuries, mapmakers put Jerusalem in the center of the world. That's what first-century Jews thought about Jerusalem, and particularly about the temple. "It was the heart of everything," N.T. Wright puts it, "the holiest spot on earth." They thought of the temple, not as a place to retreat from the world, but as a place which was God's bridgehead into the world, the place where He lived. Now, everyone knew that God's real home was in heaven, but the temple was also where God lived on earth. In our minds, we might think of the temple as God's summer home, a place He visited once in awhile when feasts or sacrifices were going on. But that doesn't capture the mindset of the day, which is that the temple in Jerusalem was where heaven and earth intersected -- that God was always in both locations. We think of heaven and earth as being far apart -- but that was not the concept back in the day.

The ancient conception of heaven and earth was that they overlap and interlock.

You can see that this is different from saying that the Jews had a special place in their heart for Jerusalem, or that its temple and traditions were meaningful to them. This was not a place where you came to learn about God as much as it was a place where you entered into God's realm, His presence, in a powerful, almost tangible way.

And what effect did Jesus' public proclamations have on this concept of God's presence? Just this: Jesus kept on saying that God had come, that His Kingdom rule was now beginning, but not in the temple in Jerusalem, but in Himself. He talked about God being in charge, and then He took charge. He acted as if He was the temple of God, the place where God was present with His people.

A thousand years earlier King David had wanted to build a house, a temple, to house God's presence. But God turned it around and said that He would build a "house" for David, a family line that would end up bringing God's own Son into the world. Now, the temple was being made redundant by the real presence of God out in the world; in Galilee, in Samaria, in Judea. One of the reasons the Jews never did see that presence of God in Jesus is because they were always looking for His presence in the temple -- they didn't expect it anywhere else.

It's like a nation focusing its attention on the skies, looking for missiles or warplanes, at the same time the real power is cutting undersea cables and dismantling electric power stations. The whole issue of sacred space was changing because of Jesus and no one seemed to catch on.

The second major shift in Jesus' ministry was in the area of time. Time, in the Jewish view of things, was moving in a direction. Six days of work, one day of rest, six days of work, one day of rest, week after week, year after year. Six years of planting and harvesting, followed by a seventh year when the land would be allowed to rest, to lie fallow. Seven times seven cycles of planting and rest and then came the fiftieth year, the year of Jubilee, of setting slaves free and forgiving debts.

The Jews were always looking forward -- to the coming day of rest, to the coming time of God, but then Jesus came announcing that the time was fulfilled, that God's kingdom was arriving, that the time for looking forward had ended because the time, God's time, was right now! This is clearly what took place in Luke 4 as Jesus read the scroll of Isaiah in His home-town synagogue:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, for He has appointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors. And that the time of the Lord's favour has come."
"He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. Everyone in the synagogue stared at Him intently. Then He said, "This Scripture has come true today before your very eyes."

Today! The year of the Lord's favour, the year of Jubilee, the year of great celebration

of the goodness of God and of His mercy, has arrived. It's here. Everything is different now!

Jesus seemed to almost go out of His way to disregard the Jewish ways of observing Sabbath. But think about this: Sabbath was a day of rest that looked forward to a year of rest, the year of rest looked seven times seven forward to a year of Jubilee, the promise of renewal and restoration ... and Jesus says that that year has arrived. The purpose of the Sabbath, to show in a small way the "rest of God", leading to increasing appreciation of the great blessings that were to come -- that purpose had been accomplished.

In a surprise announcement, Jesus said that, even on the Sabbath, His Father kept on working. We read John 5:16:

*The Jewish leaders began harrassing Jesus for breaking the Sabbath rules.
But Jesus replied, "My Father never stops working, so why should I?"*

And in Luke 13, we read another account where Jesus healed on the Sabbath and then defending His actions:

*The leader in charge of the synagogue was indignant that Jesus had healed her on the Sabbath day. "There are six days of the week for working," he said to the crowd. "Come on those days to be healed, not on the Sabbath."
But the Lord replied, "You hypocrite! You work on the Sabbath day! Don't you untie your ox or your donkey from their stalls on the Sabbath and lead them out for water? Wasn't it necessary for Me, even on the Sabbath day, to free this dear woman from the bondage in which Satan has held her for eighteen years?"*

The year of Jubilee to which Sabbath pointed, was a year of freedom, and Jesus was bringing freedom to those who had been captive to Satan's works. This was God's work and it represented the fulfilment of the Sabbath, the kind of rule of God that the Sabbath had always pointed forward to -- the liberation of His sons and daughters.

We've looked at space and time; now we turn to "matter" or the reality of the physical world. And in this we face the greatest challenge of the three if we are going to understand Jesus' world. Let me quote here from N.T. Wright again:

We have been schooled to believe, as a bedrock principle in our worldview, that the material world is relentlessly and reductively subject to the laws of physics, chemistry (etc.). But as with geography (space) and chronology (time), so here also the Jewish worldview begs to differ.

The world of matter, no less than those of space and time, was made by the creator God. It was made not only to display His beauty and power, but also as a vessel for His glory. Again and again the prophets and psalms hint at what we might conceivably have guessed from the story of creation itself: the material world was made to be filled with God's glory.

In the gospels, we see this mastery over nature many times over. Of course, there are the miracles of healing, where a power that is not commonly experienced takes away disease or repairs injury. This is called a "miracle" in the New Testament, a triumph

of the supernatural power of God over the laws of nature. There's a fascinating story in Mark 5 in which Jesus can feel the power leaving His body, power that healed a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. And Jesus' response is part of the wonder of it as He asks, "Who touched My clothes?" of a crowd of people that were pressing in on Him from all sides. When the woman finally comes forward and confesses, Jesus says, in effect, "It's alright -- your faith has made you well -- be at peace."

But there are a great variety of stories from the gospels that show Jesus as superceding the normal rules of physics. He speaks to a massive wind storm and tells it to calm down and it does. He somehow arranges that a good number of the fish who have avoided capture all night long should suddenly arrive at one side of the disciples' boat and be caught in their net. Jesus breaks up five loaves of bread and two fish and hands them to the disciples who keep breaking off pieces until a crowd numbering many thousands is fed, with baskets full left over. Jesus walks on water, something that is not done today, and then invites Peter to join Him for a stroll out on the Sea of Galilee.

When moderns read these stories they find them difficult to believe. After all, we've been brought up with the understanding that, because of gravity, apples fall to the ground rather than float up into the stratosphere. We're all about the scientific theories and the idea of observable and repeatable experiments that prove a theory. This produces a great number of scholars who try to explain away the miracles of Jesus. They try to imagine what it must have been like for the disciples who had so wanted Jesus to be great that they made up stories of how great He was many decades after He had left them. This is silly and unfounded speculation -- there is no evidence for it at all. Statements like this are made to appease those who believe in naturalism; they are not really attempts to understand the first believers and the gospel writers.

What's really going on here is that God created the world to display His great glory to believers and unbelievers alike, and to show His power and wisdom in creation. He then came to visit His creation in a physical sense, in Jesus, and in Jesus He demonstrated His lordship over all He has made. Just as we saw that in Jesus the space where God lived moved from the temple and that in Jesus the time of God's return had come, so we see in Jesus God's rule over the material world ... and we see the glory of God returning -- not to the temple where it was expected -- but to Jesus on the mount of transfiguration.

Six days later Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance changed so that His face shone like the sun, and His clothing became dazzling white. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus.

You can read the rest of the story in Matthew 17, but notice first that this is another occasion where God disregards natural laws and has supernatural things happening: Jesus' face starts shining like the sun, His clothes become brilliant white

and Moses and Elijah appear out of nowhere. The second thing to notice is that this is an appearance of God's glory. This is the glory, or dazzling brilliance, of the living God made visible on earth and, again, not at the temple, where it was expected, but in the person of Jesus.

So, we see in Jesus' life and ministry, His teaching and His actions, that He saw that space, time and matter were no longer bound by the traditions of the Jews. He really had come to make all things new. Now, sacred space was not something that people went to, i.e. the temple, but was the God-man Jesus who came to you. Now sacred time was not just another Sabbath of waiting for the promise, but was the Jubilee fulfilled by the presence of Jesus among God's people. Now, the stuff of life, the physical world that can be so beautiful and yet so ordinary; dirt, rocks, water, a hurting body or a boy's lunch - was no longer ordinary, but was the place where God's glory was made visible, where His power was unleashed, where you really could believe in springs in the desert.

Everything is different when God is in it. Just as the future that lies in wait for us will be different than what we expect, so God's coming in person, the fulfilment of centuries of glorious promises, was unexpected. It forced the leaders of the Jews into a reaction, a reaction that was both self-serving and self-destructive. They had to decide quickly, before this whole thing got out of hand, how to deal with Jesus. They talked about it often. When Judas made his offer, they were ready to deal.

Sometimes people are slow to adapt to changing circumstances, slow to see that God is at work in their reality, slow to move over to His way of acting because they are so rooted in an old way of thinking.

If an enemy cuts the communication cables and destroys the power transmitters, will we be able to react in time to save millions of lives? And if God comes in a way no one is expecting, will we bend our preconceptions so as to make room for Him, or will we nail Him to a cross? Next week, we follow Jesus from the Mount of Olives to the temple in Jerusalem -- and we'll find the answers to these questions.