

## Prophets and Great Awakenings Ps 35:22-28; Isa 51:9-16; Rom 8:31-37

### Introduction

All students of history's periodic revivals in the Church (e.g. Rom 6:4; 8:11) will be familiar with the language of the Two Great Awakenings. The First, in the eighteenth century, involved characters like the Wesleys, George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards on both sides of the Atlantic. The Second Great Awakening was in the nineteenth century around the American frontier, and its most famous figure was Charles Finney. These moves of God reshaped Christian history. These surges of the Spirit represent an acceleration of the true power of the gospel to bring to completion the Lord's overall Plan to perfect creation. They are mighty counter attacks against the chaos brought by the intrusion of evil into the world. Forerunners to the vitality before God present in Awakenings can be discerned in the boisterous way the holy men of the old covenant urge God to wake up.

### Old Testament Appeals

Listen to the psalmist's passionate appeal, "Awake and rouse yourself for my vindication, for my cause, my God and my Lord!" (Ps 35:23 cf. John 20:28), or, even more boldly, "Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!" (Ps 44:23 cf. 7:6). With intensity, Isaiah links an awakening in God with an awakening in Israel; first, "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, *who pierced the dragon?*", then, "Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean." (Isa 51:9; 52:1). These powerful petitions always come in a context of extreme urgency where the righteous have been overrun by their enemies. If the Lord doesn't act, and act quickly, all is lost. The desperate situation in ancient Israel that moved the saints to tell the Lord, "Awake, awake" and the immense spiritual need of our time have much in common.

*However*, though there are repeated exhortations to churches to wake up in the New Testament, e.g. in Ephesians, "for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."" (Eph 5:14), and to the church of Sardis in Revelation, "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 *Wake up*, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you." (Rev 3:1-3), there is *no longer any exhorting the Lord to awake*. Why? Because the desires of psalmists and prophets for God to awake have once and for all been fully realised in the coming of Christ (Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 4:25; John 12:41). To appreciate the dimensions of the cosmic renewal that has happened in Christ we must go back to the story of the first creation.

### Creation and Chaos

The creation story in Genesis starts in an unusual way, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was *without form and void, and darkness* was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. 3 And God said, "Let there be..." (Gen 1:1-3). Before there was order, the world was "empty and formless", words used later in the Old Testament for uninhabitable wasteland (Deut 32:10),

or an earth devastated by divine judgement (Isa 24:10; Jer 4:23-26). What transformed the primeval chaos into a world with purpose was the movement of the Spirit and the speaking forth of God. The power of the Word and Spirit to create order and purpose distinguishes the one true God from every other power. “For this is what the Lord says— he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited—he says: “I am the Lord, and there is no other.” (Isa 45:18 cf. 45:5-7). The foundation of creation was stable (Gen 1:31; Prov 8:22ff.), but its stability depended on the ongoing obedience of humanity.

### **The Attack on the Pinnacle of Creation**

Evil’s purpose is to undo God-created order, and the satanic attack in Eden aimed to plunge creation into chaos by strategically attacking humanity. Only after humanity is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-28) is the world said to be “very good” (Gen 1:31). Whilst in Genesis 1 humans are placed at the top of a world pyramid, in Genesis 2 the plants and animals are placed under the stewardship of a humanity already created (Gen 2:7, 15, 19). This means that when a serpent, a creature already under the charge of and named by Adam, enters into the Garden (Gen 2:19; 3:1) and approaches the man’s wife (Gen 3:1, 6) the order of creation has already been turned upside down. The action of a beast (Gen 3:1) in turning the image of God away from the Creator’s command not to eat of the tree of knowledge (Gen 2:17) was evil’s attempt to take creation back towards its original formlessness. Modern people hardly understand the biblical way of viewing the relationship between creation and chaos.

We think that given enough time human technology will master everything, but in the biblical worldview all that separates the threatening powers of chaos and destruction from the good order of creation is the will of the Lord. God has set boundaries between forces of destruction, like tsunamis, earthquakes and plague (Job 26:10; Ps 104:5-9 cf. Isa 45:5-7; Jer 14:12; 15:2; 28:8; Ezek 5:12, 17; 6:11-12; 14:19; Hab 3:5) and civilisation, and these boundaries are subject to his sovereign decrees. As the flood of Noah perfectly illustrates (2 Pet 2:5). Beyond this, when the old covenant prophetic writers, like our earlier reading from Isaiah 51, describe the Lord slaughtering the sea monster Leviathan (Job 26:11-12; Ps 89:8-9; Isa 27:1; 51:9), they are teaching that only the true God can master the evil supernatural forces which threaten the integrity of the created world. The deep brokenness and fragility of the present creation testifies that it never reached its consummation in the Plan of God. Completion would require the coming of God’s own Son as a human being (John 1:14; Rom 8:3; Heb 2:14-15 etc.). Only Jesus could lift creation into unity with the life of God himself.

### **Jesus**

In John 17, Jesus prophetically says to the Father that he has, “accomplished the work that you gave me to do”, he will successfully glorify the Father on earth as he is in heaven (John 17:1-5). Since the Lord in heaven has forever stood far above every attack of evil on the goodness of his creation, in wisdom and humility he has descended in humility into the heat of the battle (Phil 2:5-7). In becoming flesh (John 1:14) the Son of God came to exist at the interface of the clash between the dominion of darkness and the kingdom of God (Col 1:14). Every attack on Jesus, from the temptations in the wilderness to the early attempts on his life (Matt 2:13, 16; Luke 4:28-30; John 10:31) were attacks on the integrity of God himself. Everything was at stake; God’s reputation was on the line. Was the creation of humanity in

the image of God justified? Was the wisdom, goodness and love of Father and Spirit in the life of Jesus up to the task of repelling the invading forces of chaos? All would come to a climax in his suffering and death and resurrection.

Entering into Gethsemane, Jesus quotes from Zechariah concerning his own end. “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me/close to me/partner,” declares the Lord of hosts. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones.” (Zech 13:7; Matt 26:31; Mark 14:27). In this the most intimate of the ‘Wake up Lord’ petitions of the old covenant, God exhorts himself to awaken and slaughter his closest companion (cf. Rev 5:6). What is happening inside Jesus as he quotes this prophecy is something remarkable. As Zechariah had heard the Lord waking himself up to slay his favoured one so Jesus heard the Father speaking about bearing his limitless anger against the corruption evil has brought upon creation (Gen 6:11-12; Rom 5:12ff., 1 John 5:19). Whilst this does NOT mean Jesus faces the wrath of God against himself personally, it does mean he must bear the divine judgement against every power which would destroy the beautiful order of the original creation (cf. Rom 1:24, 26, 28; Rev 11:18). On the cross Jesus must allow the invasion of all the chaotic deforming powers of evil upon himself.

At their most anointed the prophets spoke of what this would mean. “his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—.... he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” (Isa 52:14; 53:2). To all ordinary appearances, the crucified Lord of glory (1 Cor 2:8) became completely unlike the glorious form and high stature Adam originally possessed in Eden. No Old Testament prophet foresaw that God would become so awake/ “woke” in today’s jargon that in taking into himself our sin (Rom 8:3; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:24) the forces of chaos would be permitted (cf. Rev 6:2, 4, 8, 9:3; 13:7) to attack the communion between Father and Son. Evil attacks the love and power holding back the forces of chaos seeking to drive creation back to a cosmos “without form and void” (Gen 1:2). The cross, in intensity and scope reverses the original “in the beginning” of Genesis. The darkness over *this* deep of Jesus hanging and dying (Mark 15:33) witnesses no movement of the Spirit over its face and no speaking of the Word creating light (Gen 1:1-2). The cry, “My God...why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34), means the dark powers cloaking the world as Jesus hung dying were attacking his integrity as Son of God and Son of Man (Mark 15:33) *and* so were assailing the goodness of the whole created order. But while the strength of evil was finite, the love of Christ had no limits. “Jesus, knowing that all was now finished/ Jesus knew that his mission was now finished...(NLT) said, “It is finished...Father into your hands ” (John 19:30; Luke 23:46) the triumphant death of Jesus witnesses what was no present in the first creation, the full presence and satisfaction of the Father

Beyond the flood of evil carried in the cross stands the resurrection. The resurrection of the Son of God means the birth of a whole new creation (2 Cor 5:17; 1 Pet 1:23-25) which cannot be touched let alone destroyed by any evil power (Dan 7:14; 1 John 5:18). The resurrection is the vindication of the fully awakened God (Ps 35:23-34) that his righteousness in creating a world in which evil *seems* to triumph has been justified. This has tremendous implications for the Church.

## **Church**

To live in union with Christ is to live at the interface between the chaos of evil's dominion and the power of the presence of the kingdom of God. It is to live in that edge where the gospel *creates* order (Rom 1:16) in the place of disorder and replaces disintegration with integrity. It is to proclaim "peace"/shalom as the healing of all things (Eph 2:17). After listing a host of trials and tribulations Paul proclaims, "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Rom 8:37). In Revelation, a book filled with every imaginable kind of catastrophe, believers are those who *conquer* through the blood of the cross and their word of testimony (2:7, 11, 17; 3:5; 12:11; 15:2). Didn't you become a Christian through a conquest of Christ (2 Cor 2:14)? When I was about 20 the powers of darkness were invading my life through chronic depression and the only solution to my troubles was Jesus. Until Jesus returns chaos will need to be conquered in his name. Let me illustrate by describing my last week.

Someone with mental illness (depression), stories of sexual brokenness (asexuality/homosexuality), 2 close relatives of Donna's raced off to hospital, news of a believer I know personally charged with a sex crime, and church dysfunction stories which disturb my sleep more than anything else. Then in the local news a story about a 17-year-old who committed suicide, she'd been in 57 different care homes and already needed a liver transplant because of alcohol abuse, which followed a long history of sexual abuse. The only remedy for levels of social disintegration like this is a great awakening.

Then on a broader scale, via Whats App and email groups I belong to, news of dozens killed in mudslides in Nepal, on top of the locust plague there, millions have been displaced by floods in Bangladesh, and, to quote, "Every single day 8 Christians are killed, 23 Christians are raped or sexually harassed, and 10 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned because of their faith."

The COVID19 pandemic is a wakeup call to Western Christians, "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. 3...If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you." (Rev 3:1-3). By God's grace we should be starting to understand that the only thing that separates human community and civilisation from the ever-threatening forces of chaos is the preserving and healing power of the resurrected Word of God. In the death and rising of Jesus God has fully awakened himself forever.

## **Conclusion**

Prophets live and die at the interface between divine order and demonic chaos, and they exhort the Church to do the same. The more that goes wrong in the world the greater the opportunity for the ministry of the kingdom of God. Our problem is that there often seems to be as much material, mental and physical chaos in the Church as in the world. In response to all this I see three concentric circles of opportunity for a great awakening. In our own lives we all have habits, dispositions and addictions that need to be confronted in the name of the Lord. In the Church we are called to minister through the power of the Spirit to those overcome by forces of evil too strong to be overcome in natural strength. Finally, we must ask Jesus to move through us to engage the chaos causing forces which are wreaking enormous disorder devastation upon society (1 John 3:8).

