

**Food for Thought Article: “Rebuilding after Destruction; Restoration after Desolation.”**

Anyone who reads the Bible from cover to cover will notice that there is a cycle of rebuilding after destruction and restoration after desolation which goes all the way through. This process, I believe, has now become hardwired into our psyche as human beings and is evident on a grand scale in the destruction and rebuilding of nations and cities, in financial crashes and recovery, and in the successes and failures of our personal lives and relationships, including our relationship with God.

We need, therefore, to be aware of and manage this dynamic. Too much emphasis on destruction and desolation will lead to despair, so this reality needs to be balanced with rebuilding and restoration which leads to hope. But the rebuilding and restoration should also take account of what happened that led to the destruction and devastation in the first place. Thank God that the Bible account has this balance throughout. There are times when God destroys and there are times when he restores and rebuilds.

We also see the prevalence of this dynamic in the fantasy world of gaming. The ‘Minecraft’ videos are among the best-selling video games of all time with more than 300 million copies sold since its introduction in 2011 and with 170 million monthly active players as of 2024. They have amassed over a trillion views and have been seen by human eyeballs more than anything else in human history!

In the game, blocks can be used to reshape the world, build fantastic creations including homes, castles, and cities. But beware, for when the sun goes down, hostile mobs abound. Will you face them or sleep through the night?

The way this game is promoted is fascinating and goes along these lines: ‘The world is yours to shape but there are dark forces who want to destroy the world. If we are going to stop them, then we are going to have to create something amazing’ - ‘Creativity doesn’t just help you craft, it is essential to your survival’ - ‘Minecraft is more than just a game. It’s a way for us to create a better future for everyone through Education, Equity and Sustainability.’

Psychologists believe the game is so popular because it chimes with human impulses to build, destroy, rebuild. Human beings are indeed blessed with the ability to create great art, architecture, technology etc. but, at the same time, cursed with the catastrophic ability to destroy everything.

In the real world of the Bible, this cycle of rebuilding after destruction and restoration after desolation is a recurring theme. Could it be that this dynamic, at least in part, accounts for the fact that the Bible remains the most popular, best-selling book in the world?

I would like to look at this dynamic in 5 contexts: Global, International, National, Local, and Personal, whilst acknowledging that these contexts often overlap.

### Global

By the end of chapter 7 of the book of Genesis, we see destruction and devastation on a global scale - for 150 days the earth was underwater, and God's plan to 'wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created – and with them the animals...' was fulfilled. The reason – 'the Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth' (Gen.6:5).

However, it is in the context of this calamity that a new note of optimism arises, introduced by the word 'but' (surely one of the most important words in the Bible). '**But** Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord.' (Gen. 6:8). '**But** God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark...' (Gen. 8:1). And because of God's grace and mercy and after Noah's worship and sacrificial offerings, God made a covenant with him and his descendants promising never again to destroy the earth by flood and vowing to provide food on a dependable global scale year after year.

### International

As I have been watching the news in recent months, at times I have been overcome by the devastation and destruction on view in war-torn countries e.g. Syria, Sudan, Russia, Ukraine, Israel, Yemen, India, Pakistan etc. And now we have the American – Israel - Iran war, with many other Gulf States now embroiled and some European countries providing 'defensive' weaponry.

I have never been in an active war zone, but I remember visiting Famagusta in Cyprus. Ancient remains remind you that it was once the richest part of Cyprus, but the Turkish invasion of 1974 left a sea of derelict buildings, some of them so bombed-out and bullet-ridden that they are deemed too dangerous to enter. Still today it looks like a huge apocalyptic film set.

So what is it that causes wars? In an address given by Rowan Williams at the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991, he said this, "Violent human conflict, in this universe, is the effect of the steady shrinkage of the world to the dimensions of

the ego. It is **my** interests that interpret and process what I see, and yours can increasingly appear only as a rival bid for the territory I have colonised.”

And because of the human condition, it seems that there is an inevitability about the reality and continuity of wars. C.S. Lewis in his sermon ‘Learning in Wartime’ said, “War creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it.”

Jesus also testified to the inevitability of warfare. He said wars and rumours of wars **must** happen, nation **will** rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom (See Mt. 24:6&7).

Throughout its history, the nation of Israel has faced ongoing hostilities from surrounding empires and nations. Oppressed and attacked by the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Syrians etc., the cry of the people of God was often one for renewal and rebuilding, but this would only occur, according to the prophets, if their rebellion was replaced by a return to the Lord and his ways.

So, for example, even during Isaiah’s prophetic ministry, during which the 10 northern tribes of Israel were taken into exile by the Assyrians, Isaiah still holds out this promise: - “Your people (Israel) will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings”. (Is. 58:12)

And “They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.” (Is. 61:4)

In the same way Micah, who prophesied at the same time as Isaiah, informed the people that the Lord was ‘planning disaster’ against them from which they ‘cannot save’ themselves (Micah 2:3). Nevertheless, Micah also prophesied a future hope, albeit a distant one: “Out of you (Bethlehem, Ephrathah) will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (Micah 5:2) And it is this ruler who will “judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.” (Mic. 4:3)

So, in the context of international conflict and devastation, there is also a future time of permanent peace to look forward to. Good news indeed!

But before we leave Israel, there is evidence of another 'army' which, on one occasion, attacked them - an army of locusts! In the days of Joel, the land was ravaged by a plague of locusts.

A swarm of locusts may contain up to 600 million insects and cover an area of 400 square miles. They block out the sun, have a voracious appetite and can eat up to 80,000 tons of food a day and travel at a speed of between 2 and 10 miles each day. They reproduce as they advance, laying 5,000 eggs per square foot. Their heads look like horse's heads as they gallop along like cavalry.

Read the book of Joel with this in mind and see the devastation caused by these invaders.

Nevertheless, after the destruction and devastation of this judgement and the call for the people of God to repent and return to him, God promises, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.....You will have plenty to eat until you are full and you will praise the name of the Lord your God." (Joel 2:25,26)

### National

As the news continues to unfold, and we look more generally at the nations of the world, we see and hear of unending streams of wars, famines, earthquakes, fires, floods etc. We know that some of these are 'man-made' whilst others are evidence of the whole of creation 'groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.' (Rms. 8:22)

Yet In many African nations, for example, where violence, conflicts, population movements, natural disasters etc. cause significant suffering, the Church continues to grow there.

However, the world's most natural disaster-prone country is the Philippines; yet it is also in the top 5 countries where the Church is growing the fastest. The book of Lamentations is one of the Biblical books that has been of greatest comfort to the people who live there as they have been hit repeatedly by typhoons, floods, cyclones, tsunamis etc.

### Local

But perhaps it is those more local devastations, those things that are closer to home, that impact us the most keenly.

*'Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds'*  
(Hab. 1:3b)

In July 2024, close to where some members of my family live, a man murdered three women in a particularly gruesome way over a period of four hours. A mother and two of her daughters were killed by the jilted boyfriend of one of the daughters. The third remaining daughter described the attack as 'demonic.' She was not wrong. But how do the husband and remaining daughter recover and rebuild after an experience like that?

Although we may not be able to ever imagine ourselves becoming involved in something like this, psychiatrists agree that in certain circumstances all of us have the capacity to get into 'cruel and unusual' states of mind in which feelings of shame, hatred, despair etc. may cause us to seek vengeance on others - verbally if not physically.

And we only need to look at the interest there is in true crime programmes, violent films and plays etc. to realise this is an ongoing aberration of the human psyche. Violence can be addictive.

The most bloody and violent Shakespearean play is 'Titus Andronicus.' This play contains scenes of rape, mutilation, multiple murders, and cannibalism. One of the characters, Aaron, says, "Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, Blood and revenge are hammering in my head."

When the Royal Shakespeare Company staged the play a couple of years ago, anyone attending was warned about its content and the impact it may have on them. There was also a possibility, apparently, that those sitting on the front rows of the auditorium may get splashed with fake stage blood. One newspaper reviewed the production as, "A brutally powerful, blood-soaked nightmare;" another as, "Very grim, very gory, very good."

But is this entertainment? How might this production contribute to someone going out and repeating what they have seen in the play? Or does this play just represent, to a certain extent, what is already happening in our societies? To what extent does it just mirror some aspects of real life?

However, one thing which can be said for certain is that the Bible contains violence from beginning to end. Details of rape, suicide, murder, mutilation, stoning, execution and crucifixion are recorded. Much real, not fake, blood is spilled throughout. Violence is an integral and ongoing aspect of life in the Bible.

But what are we to do as Christians? Dismiss this reality from our hearts and minds and focus only on what is noble, pure, lovely, and admirable?

Could this not just become a form of unrealistic escapism from all we see happening around us? However, it is King David himself, a man who had a lot of blood on his hands, who reminds us that God 'hates with a passion those who love violence' (Ps. 11:5).

Jesus, of course, was the peace-loving victim of violence. His words, sharper than any two-edged sword, were the only weapon he ever used. Jesus was a man of peace, indeed the Prince of Peace.

When he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, and just about to be arrested, something remarkable happened. I say remarkable because it is recorded in all four gospel accounts. Lots of Jesus' followers had swords, presumably because they wanted to defend Jesus by force, and one of them used his to cut off the right ear of the servant of the high priest. Although all four gospel writers recorded this event, only John gives us a couple more details. He tells us the assailant was Simon Peter, and the name of the assailed was Malchus (Jn. 18:10).

However, Jesus told his followers in no uncertain terms to put their swords back in their sheaths. For them to fight would be to prevent Jesus from drinking the cup his Father had prepared for him and in any case, Jesus could count on an angelic army to rescue him should he call for it. What's more he warned them that those who draw the sword will die by the sword (Mt. 26:51&52). Then he replaced the ear - restoration after amputation.

### Personal

I guess that all of us will experience occasions where we yield to temptation, doubt, or deny or disobey the Lord. Times when the edifice of our faith is shaken and it seems all we are left with is a pile of rubble.

I remember one occasion where I thought my faith had been destroyed and all I was left with was a sense of falling repeatedly into a sea of thick mud from which I couldn't escape. This went on for a few weeks.

However, I had made arrangement to attend a Day Seminar at St. Paul's Cathedral in London on 'World Poverty.' When the day came, it was the last event I felt like going to, but I went anyway.

At the end of the Seminar, something unexpected happened. The organisers said that if we wanted to stay, we could join them for Evensong and, as a special treat, we could join the Choir and sit in the choirstalls!

I will never forget the psalm they started to sing: -

“I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.

He lifted me out of the mud and mire.

He set my feet on a rock

And gave me a firm place to stand.

He put a new song in my mouth,

A hymn of praise to our God.”

(Ps. 40:1-3)

Immediately, everything I thought I had lost was restored and I returned home walking on air!

The classic case in the New Testament of the restoration of a failed disciple is that of the apostle Peter. After promising never to abandon the Lord and even to be willing to die for him, the reality was that he then swore that he didn't even know the Lord - three times. No wonder Peter 'wept bitterly.' Human bravado is never enough to ensure faithfulness to the Lord when the going gets tough.

John records Peter's failure and restoration in some detail. The denial took place in the courtyard of the high priest as Peter 'warmed himself' by a fire. The restoration took place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee also in the context of 'a fire of burning coals.' As Peter stared into the glowing embers of the barbeque prepared by Jesus, his mind must inevitably have gone back to the last time he glared into a fire in the high priest's courtyard three days previously. His feelings of guilt and shame must have been rekindled. [Only John records the detail of the two fires].

And then come the gentle, but incisive, words of Jesus which restore Peter after his time of utter despair. The Biblical pattern of rebuilding after desolation continues.

Very few of our Bible translations convey the sense of the three questions that Jesus asked Peter and Peter's replies. My paraphrase of the conversation (Jn. 21:15-17) goes like this: -

Jesus: 'Simon, son of John, do you really love me more than these other disciples?'

Peter: 'You know that I'm your friend.'

Jesus: 'Feed my lambs. Yes, but Simon, son of John, do you really love me?'

Peter: 'Yes Lord, you know I'm your friend.'

Jesus: 'Then care for my sheep. But Simon, son of John, are you even my friend?'

Peter was upset because Jesus had said to him, 'Are you even my friend? And he said: Lord, you know everything, you know I'm your friend.'

Jesus: 'Then feed my sheep.'

Peter's 'love' for Jesus, at this point in his walk with the Lord, was unable to reach the height and depth of Jesus' love for him. However, it seems to me that Peter's faith would now be on a much stronger and more realistic foundation. After the desolation of denial comes the restoration of relationship; sometimes Jesus can wound or allow us to be wounded before he heals and strengthens us.

Also, key in Peter's restoration were Jesus' prayers for him. Jesus had already told Peter that Satan had wanted to destroy Peter's faith and sift him like wheat, but that Jesus had prayed for him that his faith might not be eclipsed. How wonderful it is to know that Jesus continues to intercede for you and me at the Father's right hand, preventing Satan, or anyone else, from snatching us out of the Father's hand.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the last example of destruction and restoration in the Bible i.e. the destruction of Babylon and the new creation of Jerusalem and the new heaven and earth.

In the last few chapters of the book of Revelation, we see the sudden and rapid fall of the 'great city of Babylon'. Here, 'Babylon' represents society in all its idolatry, immorality, violence, self-indulgent luxury, sorcery, deceit and drug addiction.

"Woe! Woe to you, great city, you mighty city of Babylon! In one hour, your doom has come!" (Rev. 18:10b)

If we doubt whether this sudden destruction could really take place, maybe we should pay close attention to what Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, said recently when he warned that what is happening in the Gulf War could cause the world economy and world peace to collapse.

Contrasted with the destruction of Babylon (depicted as a dirty prostitute) is the arrival of the New Jerusalem (depicted as a pure, radiant Bride). What a difference!

So it is that rebuilding after destruction and restoration after desolation are key themes throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and we need to hold them together in our understanding of how God is at work among us in our global, international, national, local and personal situations.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to plant and a time to uproot... a time to tear down and a time to build... a time for war and a time for peace.” (Some verses taken from Ecclesiastes chapter 3:1-8).

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George Irving – April 2026

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