

When Disasters
Strike

By
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Introduction

Recently, a 7.0 earthquake hit the small island nation of Haiti, and some of the images that have been streaming out of that area have evoked sorrow, compassion, sacrifice, introspection and questions. Many people find it difficult to fathom the magnitude of destruction that this poorest nation in the Western hemisphere has suffered. Some of the statistics are:

- Estimated 200,000 deaths
- Another 250,000 injured
- Over 1.5 million left homeless or displaced
- 35 Americans confirmed dead and only 9,400 of up to 45,000 Americans who were in Haiti have been accounted for
- Estimated 20,000 people are dying each day that could be saved by surgery
- Physical destruction of property into the billions of dollars

Aftershocks have continued in an uncharacteristic fashion. Normally, aftershocks tend to decrease in both frequency and intensity. However in the case of the Haitian earthquake, the frequency of the tremors seems to be expanding and the intensity has not greatly diminished. In fact, over a week after the major earthquake struck, another quake with a 5.9 magnitude rocked the unstable country once again.

The Haitian people must wonder what else must be coming every time the earth shakes. And in their minds are the lingering questions about food, water, shelter, family and the future. Questions such as, "Is God angry with us?" and "Why?" seem to enter many people's minds. You see, disasters will do that to people – they do not only create crises, but also questions. Questions that is either physical in nature or theological in nature. Perhaps these can be combined into one necessary question for all Christians: How do we react or respond now?

Psalm 66

¹To the chief Musician, A Song or Psalm. Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands:

²Sing forth the honour of his name: make his praise glorious.

³Say unto God, How terrible art thou in thy works! Through the greatness of thy power shall thine enemies submit themselves unto thee.

⁴All the earth shall worship thee, and shall sing unto thee; they shall sing to thy name. Selah.

⁵Come and see the works of God: he is terrible in his doing toward the children of men.

⁶He turned the sea into dry land: they went through the flood on foot: there did we rejoice in him.

⁷He ruleth by his power for ever; his eyes behold the nations: let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah.

⁸O bless our God, ye people, and make the voice of his praise to be heard:

⁹Which holdeth our soul in life, and suffereth not our feet to be moved.

¹⁰For thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us, as silver is tried.

¹¹Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidst affliction upon our loins.

¹²Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water: but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place.

¹³I will go into thy house with burnt offerings: I will pay thee my vows,

¹⁴Which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble.

¹⁵I will offer unto thee burnt sacrifices of fatlings, with the incense of rams; I will offer bullocks with goats. Selah.

¹⁶Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.

¹⁷I cried unto him with my mouth, and he was extolled with my tongue.

¹⁸If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me:

¹⁹But verily God hath heard me; he hath attended to the voice of my prayer.

²⁰Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me.

This is a song of praise. This is not for a tragedy that occurred, but for the unseen work of God during a crisis. This psalm clearly illustrates the dependency of man on the greatness of God during times of trouble and tribulations. It is believed by some that this psalm was written after Hezekiah's deliverance during a time of national distress. The audience of the psalm is identified as "all who fear God" (v. 16) and throughout this particular psalm, the writer instructs the God-fearer regarding our

response to crises. Although it is difficult to address all the issues that a disaster may present, this text offers some very useful advice.

Seek Understanding

“Come and see the works of God” (Psalm 66:5)

Natural catastrophes, like sicknesses and accidents, leave us with many questions concerning morality and the nature of God. My wife has asked many times how can God let things, like the Haitian earthquake, happen?

The debate about God’s role in physical disasters predates even the incarnation of Christ (remember Job?). Unfortunately, people tend to rush to judgment on these issues (and many others as well) and often come to wrong conclusions. There are several different responses to disaster, as noted by Dr. Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

1. **The Atheist’s Response** Oxford University Professor Richard Dawkins explains, “Human life is nothing more than a way for selfish genes to multiply and reproduce.” His conclusion would be that life is both random and meaningless. When applied to natural disasters, the atheist must conclude, “It is just nature – to bad/”
2. **The Philosopher’s Response** When observing catastrophic death and destruction the philosopher suggests, “If God is God He is not good. If God is good He is not God.” The philosopher believes “God can be good, or He can be powerful, but He cannot be both.” Christians reject this outright. We understand that God is both “full of mercy” (v. 20) and unable to be “tempted by evil” (James 1:13).
3. **The Legalist’s Response** The legalist explains that all suffering is a consequence of sin. Now some suffering is a result of moral failure, but we must be careful not to blame all suffering to sin. This was the response of the Pharisees in John 9 to the blind man. We should remember that the earthquake in Haiti touched the just and unjust alike. Not only did churches and orphanages crumble, but pastors and Christians were numbered with the dead.
4. **The Liberal Religionist’s Response** Liberal theologians also rush to conclusions that prove untrue. There are three mistakes that they tend to make. Some blame God and try to assign evil to the hand of God. Others, like the Christian Scientist, minimize or diminish God by rejecting the reality of the physical as an illusion. Still others, like the Open Theists, doubt God’s character by suggesting that God is always ready with a Plan B in case Plane A

fails. By doing this, they have belittled both His power and omniscience.

5. **The Christian's Response** In contrast, the Christian trusts the wisdom and sovereignty of God without making Him the author of sin.

Pray for those in Need

“I cried unto Him with my mouth” (Psalm 66:17)

During a calamity or disaster, the follower of God has access to the very throne room of Heaven (Hebrews 4:14-16) through prayer. The psalmist in our text cried out to God with words that indicate a sense of urgency and desperation. And true to His word, God listened and showed mercy (v. 19).

In light of the circumstances in Haiti, we should pray for God’s grace and mercy for several groups of people.

- Those that are hurting personally
- Those that are grieving over the loss of life and livelihood
- Those that fear and worry about what to do or where to turn
- Those that question and wonder what is happening
- Those who lead the recovery efforts
- Those who help the hurting

Although this is a great tragedy that has occurred in Haiti, we do see that God’s mighty works are happening in the recovery. God has answered many, many prayers. Consider the story of Ena Zizi that was reported on FoxNews.com

For a whole week after the quake killed roughly 200,000 people, search-and-rescue teams were emerging from the ruins with improbable success stories. Experts said that without water, buried quake victims were unlikely to survive beyond three days.

Zizi had been attending a church meeting at the home of Haiti’s Roman Catholic archbishop when disaster struck. She was trapped in the debris. A week later, she was rescued by a Mexican disaster team that was created in the wake of Mexico City’s 1985 earthquake.

The 69-year-old Zizi said she prayed constantly during her imprisonment under the rubble and was among the unlikely survivors. Zizi said that after the quake, she spoke back and forth with a vicar who also was trapped. But after a few days, he fell silent, and she spent the rest of the time praying and waiting.

“I talked only to my boss, God.”

Against all odds, God answered Zizi’s prayers. So keep on praying.

Trust God

“Which holdeth our soul in life...” (Psalm 66:9)

God is our Father, and like children in a time a crisis, the people of God have placed their hands in that of their heavenly Father's. And for good reason too.

God is Unchanging (James 1:17)

God is not a spiritual Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He does not switch between good and evil in either His actions or His intentions toward mankind. Thankfully, God is not like us.

God is Self-contained

God is God. He is the great I AM. He is who He is and He has revealed Himself to us. It is vainly foolish and arrogant for us to embrace the Oprah method to define the nature of God: “MY God is” Furthermore, God can exist completely apart from humanity and we need to gratefully praise Him for His intervention in the human condition.

God is Good, Merciful, Gracious and Compassionate

We should note here that the mercy and compassion of God will not permanently withhold the demand for justice in the face of sustained immorality. Justice needs to be upheld. God said in Genesis 6:3, “My spirit shall not always strive with man.”

God is Absolutely Sovereign in the Universe

We must be careful here. We must distinguish between sovereignty and causality. God can do anything that He wishes and while God certainly could cause an earthquake to accomplish His greater purpose (remember the ten plagues of Egypt), we must guard against assigning evil to God. He rules over all things in order to bring them into conformity to His will. In other words, we must trust God's great wisdom when we fail to understand His great purposes.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.” Isaiah 55:8

In Conclusion

It has been stated, "God from eternity, decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs, and governs all events; yet so as not in any way to be the author or approver of sin nor to destroy the free will and responsibility of intelligent creatures."

God is in control. We can be assured of that. He will never make a mistake. Peter got into trouble when he looked at the waves, but as long as his eyes were on Jesus, he was able to rise above the storm (Matthew 14:28-31). The wind and waves which seem over our head are under His feet!

We always want to "feel" good. What we need to do is to rest in the "fact" that all is well even when we don't feel it. Bad things will happen, but God is good.

Remember, if God can be trusted with our souls, He can be trusted with our feet and everything that stands above them.

We don't know why the towers fall at a particular time. We don't know why the plane crashes on a given day. We don't know why the umbilical cord chokes a baby to death. We don't know why an elderly Christian woman dies in a tornado. We don't know why a four year old gets shot on New Year's Eve while worshipping. We don't know why poor countries suffer from natural disasters. But we do know this; unless we are born again, we shall all likewise perish.

We can be assured of the goodness of God in all things if we have the assurance of salvation.