

FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**DR. DAVID JEREMIAH**

**WHAT  
ARE YOU  
AFRAID  
OF?**

**FACING DOWN YOUR FEARS WITH FAITH**

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# Introduction

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You are asleep in your bed when your clock radio shocks you awake, blaring into the beginning of the day with news of traffic tie-ups, approaching thunderstorms, overnight killings, fires, stock-market plunges, government scandals, and car wrecks. Instead of jumping out of bed, you pull the covers up over your head. You know what a fearful world we live in, and you dread facing all the challenges of the day.

But maybe your morning fears are not in the news; they're about your job. You live in constant fear of getting caught in the downsizing trend. Or you're apprehensive about a business deal that has your career on the line.

Maybe your deepest fears lie at home. Can you meet this month's mortgage payment? Does your marriage seem shaky? Are your kids worrying you? After a recent service at the church I pastored in Southern California, a young soldier who had just returned from Afghanistan wept as he asked me to pray for him. He feared that he might be losing his family.

*Might.* That's the word that's haunting him. Our greatest fear is the conditional might—the threat of what *might* happen. Fear trades in the market of possibility. Or even impossibility—for



fear is the tyrant of the imagination. It imposes itself upon us from the shadows, from its hazy mirror of maybe.

My friend Don Wyrzten has been there:

The illusive monster of fear lurks in the shadows, waiting to claw my soul to shreds. As one prone to melancholia, I see its ugly face often: when I'm struggling with the emotional stress of a difficult relationship, when I'm afraid failure is just around the corner, when success seems too hard to handle, and on days when free-floating anxiety is getting the best of me.<sup>1</sup>

That last phrase captures it for me: "free-floating anxiety." That's the worst one—the foreboding fear that something is wrong, but you don't know what. It envelops you like a cloud.

If you have struggled with fear, you are not alone. Fear is no respecter of people or of ages. It strikes the weak and the powerful. It haunts the young and the old, the rich and the poor. Even those who seem to have it all, including celebrities and heroes and "fearless" leaders, confess to a wide array of phobias.

Jennifer Aniston, Cher, and Whoopi Goldberg are all aviophobes. They are afraid of flying. Barbra Streisand is xenophobic—she is uncomfortable around strangers. Michael Jackson was haunted by the fear of contamination, infections, and diseases. He was mysophobic. But the celebrity with the most phobias is Woody Allen. He's afraid of insects, sunshine, dogs, deer, bright colors, children, heights, small rooms, crowds, and cancer.

Famous people of the past were no different. George Washington was scared to death of being buried alive. Richard Nixon was terrified of hospitals, and Napoleon Bonaparte, the military and political genius, feared cats.

Phobias: a circus parade of mental enslavement.

Some fears attack us only momentarily, but others can stay with us for a lifetime. A person with a fear of heights might feel her pulse shoot up when she steps into a glass-walled elevator and ascends twenty stories over a hotel lobby. But her fear is over the moment she steps out of the elevator into the hotel hallway.

On the other hand, our fears of failure, loneliness, rejection, impending disaster, or contracting a major illness never seem to go away. They are lifetime fears that simmer on the mind's back burner. They are fears that prey on life itself. Those are the fears I address in this book.

These fears can be described with what linguists call a “semantic range” of words: *fear, worry, anxiety, intimidation, unsettledness, dread, unease, alarm, distress, apprehensiveness*, and others. Sometimes it's hard to know exactly which of those words best describes what we're feeling, and it really doesn't matter. Whatever term we use, these feelings can all trigger toxic responses: immobilization, paralysis, withdrawal, passivity, depression, and psychosomatic disorders—physical maladies with no discernible physical cause.

When I ask, “What are you afraid of?” I'm asking, “What is it that immobilizes you? What is stealing your joy and destroying your hope? What is robbing you of sleep, night after night? What keeps you from living by faith and being a risk taker? What keeps you from giving your life wholly to a loving God who wants nothing but the best for you?”

I think I know the answers to these questions, at least in part, because I've lived shoulder to shoulder with a lot of mature Christian people my entire life. And I've been a pastor to thousands for nearly five decades. I've discovered that everybody—including me—is afraid of something. Our challenge is to

discover and analyze our fears and find a godly (biblical) response to them.

When the apostle Paul was giving counsel to Timothy, his young protégé, he knew Timothy was afraid of something—probably of his assignment to lead the large church in Ephesus. Timothy was raised in a small town in Asia Minor, and Ephesus was the big city. Paul himself had spent three years in Ephesus, building up the church there. It was led by a strong group of elders, yet false teachers were causing trouble. And Timothy was supposed to go in and be the leader of the whole thing. What young pastor wouldn't have felt fear at the prospect?

So what did Paul tell Timothy? “Your fear is not from God. What do come from God are power, love, and a stable mental attitude” (2 Timothy 1:7, my paraphrase).

Paul knew that when we get God's perspective on the source of our fear, we can set aside what is not from Him and embrace what is. In all my years of following Christ, studying the Bible, and pastoring well-intentioned Christians, I have yet to find a fear for which God does not have an answer. And the reason is simple: God Himself is the answer to all our fears.

Think about it—fear is almost always based on the future. Sometimes we're afraid because we know what's coming in the future. But more commonly, we're afraid of what we don't know about the future. We're afraid of what might happen. For instance, the Gallup organization asked thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds what they were most afraid of. In descending order, the top ten fears of these teens were terrorist attacks, spiders, death/being killed, not succeeding in life/being a failure, war, heights, crime/violence, being alone, the future, and nuclear war.<sup>2</sup>

Notice that all these fears are future focused, and all are merely “maybes.” These teens may encounter none of them. Whether

the future is just a minute from now (you're waiting on a doctor's diagnosis) or five years from now (you worry about having enough money for retirement), fear's home office is the future.

But what is the future to God? To Him the future is now! We live inside time while God, who made it, lives outside it. We know relatively little about the future, while God knows everything about it. All the events in our lives occur in two time frames: past and future. (The present is a continuously fleeing, infinitesimal moment that becomes past even before we can define it.) God, on the other hand, has only one frame of reference: the eternal now, in which He sees and knows everything, including the future.

That's why God is the answer to all our fears. If God is good and loving (and He is), and if God is all-powerful (and He is), and if God has a purpose and a plan that include His children (and He does), and if we are His children (as I hope you are), then there is no reason to fear anything, for God is in control of everything.

I know—that's good theology, and you probably believe it. But you still have fears and apprehensions and a hollow place in the pit of your stomach, either sometimes or all the time. The great author Edith Wharton once said that she didn't believe in ghosts, but she was afraid of them. It's one thing to know something with the mind, and another to believe it with the heart.

How do you help a little child face her fear of the darkness? First you appeal to the mind. You turn on the light and show her there's nothing scary in the room. Then you help her attune her heart to what her mind has accepted. This is the process of faith, for all of us. We accept that God is in control, and on that basis, we shift our burdens to His perfect shoulders.

But what about our shaky future? Pessimism doesn't work, because it's another form of mental enslavement. Optimism may have no basis in reality. The one way to walk boldly and

confidently into an unknown future is to stake everything on the power and goodness and faithfulness of God.

To understand why God is the answer to all our fears, we must understand what the Bible says about fear. And it says a lot. It tells us more than three hundred times not to fear. “Fear not” is its most frequently repeated command. The word *afraid* occurs more than two hundred times, and *fear* more than four hundred. And lest you think our Bible heroes were fearless, more than two hundred individuals in Scripture are said to have been afraid. And not all these were the “bad guys”; many were the main characters—David, Paul, Timothy, and others.

Biblical heroes were regular people who had to learn the same things you and I have to learn—to drive out fear by increasing their knowledge of God, to shift their focus from their present fear to the eternal God, to replace what they didn’t know about the future with what they did know about Him. They had to put away childish things (being afraid of everything) and grow up in their faith and understanding.

I wrote this book because I see fear as a real and present danger in the body of Christ. Many Christians are not living lives free of fear, and there can be serious consequences when fear is not removed. Author and educator Neil T. Anderson writes,

Fear is a thief. It erodes our faith, plunders our hope, steals our freedom, and takes away our joy of living the abundant life in Christ. Phobias are like the coils of a snake—the more we give in to them, the tighter they squeeze. Tired of fighting, we succumb to the temptation and surrender to our fears. But what seemed like an easy way out becomes, in reality, a prison of unbelief—a fortress of fear that holds us captive.<sup>3</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Jesus came to “proclaim liberty to the captives,” and I believe that includes those held captive by fear (Luke 4:18). He also says that truth is the key to freedom (John 8:32). And here is the truth: God is good (Psalm 119:68), God is love (1 John 4:8, 16), and God has a future filled with hope for His children (Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 8:28-29). God is a refuge and a fortress, a shield and a defender for those who trust in Him (Psalm 91:2-4). For those reasons, and more . . .

You shall not be afraid of the terror by night,  
Nor of the arrow that flies by day,  
Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness,  
Nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday.  
A thousand may fall at your side,  
And ten thousand at your right hand;  
But it shall not come near you.

PSALM 91:5-7

As you read this book, my prayers are that you will grow in your conviction that God is the answer to all your fears, that as you look to the future you will see nothing except His power and love guarding your every step, and that you will find the truth that sets you free to live the fearless life God created you to enjoy.

*Dr. David Jeremiah*

JUNE 2013



## CHAPTER 1

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# DISASTER: *The Fear of Natural Calamity*

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*We will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though  
the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.*

PSALM 46:2

At least the Trowbridges had a place to hide—a neighbor’s cellar. Kelcy, her husband, and their three children filed into its cool darkness, huddled beneath a blanket, and listened to the warning sirens howling through a Monday afternoon in May of 2013. The Trowbridges lived in the suburbs of Oklahoma City, and a deadly tornado was on its way.

The family could only sit, holding hands and listening as the sirens were drowned out by sounds that were louder and far more terrible. Shrieking winds converged upon the house, and there was a violent pounding on the cellar door. The children began to cry. “Shhh, it’s just debris,” Kelcy said. “Loose things blowing around, hitting the walls.”

Then, after about forty minutes, an eerie silence fell. The



Trowbridges emerged into the light of a world they didn't recognize. The neighborhood was a shambles. Where was their home? It lay flattened to the earth, like rows of other houses on their street. Where was the family car? They eventually discovered that it had been lifted into the air, carried down the street, and then thrown on its roof.

One by one, the neighbors emerged, all speechless. Where there should have been birds singing, there was only the sound of muffled sobs. Here were the remains of their lives and the loss of comfortable illusions—illusions of stability and security in a rational world.

Mr. Trowbridge wasn't one to stand around. He went to work salvaging, sorting. But after a moment, he pulled back abruptly.

"Call the police," he said in a flat tone.

There, amid the bricks and pipes and rubble, was a little child—a girl no more than two or three years old. She was dead. Mr. Trowbridge was stoic until the police arrived, and then he lost it—weeping for the girl, for his family, for the violence of the earth.

Meanwhile, near Plaza Towers Elementary, Stuart Earnest Jr. saw and heard things that he knew would haunt him for the rest of his life. The school was directly hit by the tornado. Seven children lost their lives, and Earnest couldn't block out the sounds of the tragedy. He heard the voices of those screaming for help and the equally heartrending screams of those trying to come to their assistance.

A fourth grader named Damian Britton was among the Plaza Towers survivors, thanks to a courageous teacher who had saved his life. It seemed to Damian that all the horrors occurred in a five-minute period before the students came out of their hiding places. It was much the same everywhere—five short minutes

for little ones, or anyone else, to learn such profound lessons of life and loss.

I have to tell you that it is difficult to recount those stories. It would be so much easier to keep the tone pleasant and comfortable, even in a book about fear. The problem, of course, is that the stories are true, and we know it. And they can happen again in another five minutes or tomorrow or the next day. Every year the news brings us yet another reminder that the natural forces governing this planet are troubled and unstable.

We live in a kind of necessary denial. We proceed with our daily lives as if we have guarantees of security that simply aren't possible in this life. We congratulate ourselves for our impressive advances in technology, and we pretend we've conquered every challenge to life and health. But it's not so. Nature is gorgeous and inspiring—and also monstrous and inhuman.

In 2004 the big tragedy was the Indian Ocean tsunami, which killed 230,000 people. I can't get past those numbers. In 2005 we encountered Hurricane Katrina. And who can forget 2010–11? The earthquake in Haiti cost another 220,000 people their lives; the tsunami in Japan, at least 15,000.

But those are merely the headline weather events. There are too many earthquakes, fires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, famines, storms, and tsunamis for us to even keep a running tally. Natural calamities rage on in our world, costing us countless billions of dollars and, more significantly, hundreds of thousands of lives.

Natural disaster raises many questions about the nature of our security, about our fear of the uncontrollable, and especially about the character of God. These questions need answers. But I'd like to open the discussion by sharing about a biblical character who experienced two natural disasters in the space of twenty-four hours. His name, of course, was Job.

## NATURAL DISASTERS IN THE LIFE OF JOB

Job has become the quintessential model for enduring disaster, and if ever there was someone we'd think didn't deserve it, it was Job. The first few verses of his book give testimony concerning Job in four areas. We learn first of all about his *faith*—that he was a man who was “blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). Job was not sinless, but he was mature in character and a man of righteousness.

Job is also distinguished because of his *fortune*: “His possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East” (Job 1:3).

In Job's day, wealth was calculated in terms of land, animals, and servants, and Job had all three in abundance. He was the wealthiest man of his time.

He wasn't just a man of fortune but also of *family*. The first chapter tells us that he raised sons and daughters who were close knit. They held great birthday feasts for one another, after which their father would make burnt offerings to God on their behalf. He said, “It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts” (Job 1:5). Faith and family were intertwined for him.

Finally, he had many *friends*. Some are famous for their role in Job's book, but there were no doubt many others who weren't mentioned. Job 2:11 recounts how a group of his closest friends arrived to mourn with him after the great losses he sustained. If you know anything about Job's narrative, you remember that these friends ended up letting him down. But still, they were his friends, and they came from distant parts to minister to him in his time of need.

They were right to sit with him to help him bear the load of mourning. Where they went wrong was when they attempted to give pat explanations and solutions for a situation that was anything but simple. In the end, they brought out the worst rather than the best in Job. Yet we're told that he forgave them and there was reconciliation (Job 42:9-11).

What those friends couldn't know—what Job himself couldn't know—was that spiritual forces were in play far beyond their reckoning. The details are recounted in Job 1:8-12:

The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?"

So Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!"

And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

Armed with God's permission, Satan went to work, and Job's ruin came rapidly, with four calamities occurring in one day. These were the terms: Satan could come after Job's possessions, but not his person. And so the great experiment began. But what we see already is that it's clear who is in charge of this world. The devil can test Job, but not without God's permission.

Our God reigns, and we can't afford to forget it during a discussion of disaster—or any other time.

What do you give the man who has everything? Disaster—that was something Job had yet to experience. It begins during one of those feasts, with the sons and daughters all gathered together, laughing and enjoying one another's company.

A messenger approaches Job with disturbing news. Sabeen raiders have descended on his estate, hijacked Job's cattle, and killed his servants. This messenger alone has survived to tell the tale (Job 1:13-15).

Yet even before the servant has finished his account, before Job has taken it all in, the door opens and another messenger stands there. He is pale, his eyes wide, as he whispers, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants" (Job 1:16).

At this point it seems that Job's day can't get any worse. But a third messenger is right behind. The phrase "while he was still speaking" is used three times in this passage. For Job, at least, the old adage is true: calamities often come in bunches.

The third messenger brings news that there has been a raid by the Chaldeans. They have stolen the camels, killed the servants, and yes, left one distressed messenger (Job 1:17).

A lot has gone wrong for Job—calamity piled upon calamity. But before he can make sense of any of this, let alone form any kind of recovery plan, the coup de grâce falls:

While he was still speaking, another also came and said,  
"Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking  
wine in their oldest brother's house, and suddenly a  
great wind came from across the wilderness and struck

the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; and I alone have escaped to tell you!”

JOB 1:18-19

Along with everything else, Job must have been blessed with a strong heart. Can you imagine taking in such news? He was devoted to his children, constantly bringing them before God. Despite all his intercession, they have died in one fell blow. He faces ten fresh graves and an aching silence from heaven. *Why, God?*

The book of Job has always been the go-to book to help people cope with the existence and effects of evil. At the outset, the book shows us three major sources of evil. First, there are evil individuals, such as the Sabeans and the Chaldeans who killed Job's servants and stole his oxen and donkeys. Then it shows the destructive evil of natural disasters in the fire that destroyed Job's livestock and herders and the windstorm that killed Job's children. And behind it all, we see evil on a cosmic level in the hand of Satan who, with God's permission, orchestrated the entire disaster.

Since scholars consider Job to be the oldest book in the Bible, we know that the problem of natural disasters has been with us for as long as human beings have walked the earth. The Bible doesn't gloss over the tougher questions of life; it doesn't try to make us avert our gaze. We're invited to stand with Job in the cemetery, looking down at the ashes of his dreams, and ask God *why?* The first question evoked by this story in particular and natural calamities in general is this: What do these recurring disasters say about God?

## **NATURAL DISASTERS AND THE REALITY OF GOD**

### *God Cannot Be Divorced from Disasters*

Some say that God should not even be included in the discussion of disasters since He would have nothing to do with such evil. The explanation goes something like this: God created the world, but He is not involved in the operation of it. This philosophy is called deism. It accepts the existence and goodness of God but distances Him from anything that happens in the world He created.

I think many Christians often adopt a sort of deism in an attempt to get God off the hook. It allows us to affirm the goodness of God in the face of terrible evils simply by saying it's not His fault. He created a good world, and He should not be blamed if it goes wrong. But Scripture is clear that God is actively at work in the universe (Job 37).

Another way we extricate God from responsibility for disasters is to blame them all on Satan. But we know from our study of Job that Satan cannot do anything without God's permission (Job 1:8-12). If Satan has to get permission from God to do what he does, then God is still in control and reigns in human affairs. People sense His control over everything when they call natural disasters "acts of God."

So for us to say that God is not involved in these cataclysmic events is too simplistic to explain all the facts. Whether it's comfortable or not, we must discuss this issue with theological integrity. The Bible teaches us that God is sovereign—He reigns in the nice moments and in those that aren't so nice. Let's look at some of the reasons disaster exists in a world that God controls.

### **GOD EMPLOYS THE ELEMENTS OF NATURE IN THE OPERATION OF THE WORLD**

The Bible contains many passages refuting the idea that God set nature in motion and now lets it run as it will. These Scriptures

present a hands-on God who is intimately involved in controlling and sustaining all events in the natural world. Here is a small sampling:

Whatever the LORD pleases He does,  
In heaven and in earth,  
In the seas and in all deep places.  
He causes the vapors to ascend from  
the ends of the earth;  
He makes lightning for the rain;  
He brings the wind out of His treasuries.

PSALM 135:6-7

He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and  
sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

MATTHEW 5:45

He says to the snow, "Fall on the earth";  
Likewise to the gentle rain and the heavy  
rain of His strength. . . .  
By the breath of God ice is given,  
And the broad waters are frozen.  
Also with moisture He saturates the  
thick clouds;  
He scatters His bright clouds.  
And they swirl about, being turned by  
His guidance,  
That they may do whatever He commands  
them  
On the face of the whole earth.

JOB 37:6, 10-12



**GOD EMPLOYS THE ELEMENTS OF NATURE IN HIS OPPOSITION TO EVIL**

Not only does God use the elements of nature to keep the world running, He also uses them as punishment or to drive His people toward righteousness.

Early in the Bible, we find God sending a flood to destroy a sin-blackened world, sparing only righteous Noah and his family (Genesis 6–8). Later, when the Israelites were wandering in the desert, God sent judgment upon Dathan, Abiram, and Korah, who had rejected Him. The “earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up . . . with all their goods” (Numbers 16:32).

God sent fire to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness (Genesis 19:24); He sent plagues to punish Egypt (Exodus 7–12); He crafted a plague that killed seventy thousand men because of David’s sin in numbering the people (2 Samuel 24:15); He sent a fierce storm to get Jonah’s attention and bring him to repentance (Jonah 1:4-17).

In Amos 4, there is an extended passage describing God’s dealings with the disobedience of His people. If we’re ever tempted to separate God from natural disaster, this passage should stop us in our tracks. Here is Eugene Peterson’s vivid paraphrase:

“You know, don’t you, that I’m the One  
who emptied your pantries and cleaned out your  
cupboards,  
Who left you hungry and standing in bread lines?  
But you never got hungry for me. You continued to  
ignore me.”  
GOD’S DECREE.

“Yes, and I’m the One who stopped the rains  
three months short of harvest.

I'd make it rain on one village  
but not on another.  
I'd make it rain on one field  
but not on another—and that one would dry up.  
People would stagger from village to village  
crazed for water and never quenching their thirst.  
But you never got thirsty for me.  
You ignored me.”  
GOD'S Decree.

“I hit your crops with disease  
and withered your orchards and gardens.  
Locusts devoured your olive and fig trees,  
but you continued to ignore me.”  
GOD'S Decree.

“I revisited you with the old Egyptian plagues,  
killed your choice young men and prize horses.  
The stink of rot in your camps was so strong  
that you held your noses—  
But you didn't notice me.  
You continued to ignore me.”  
GOD'S Decree.

“I hit you with earthquake and fire,  
left you devastated like Sodom and Gomorrah.  
You were like a burning stick  
snatched from the flames.  
But you never looked my way.  
You continued to ignore me.”  
GOD'S Decree.

AMOS 4:6-11, *THE MESSAGE*

When we distance God from responsibility for the calamities of the world, we are claiming more than we know. For if God is not in control of the world's disasters, then how can we depend on Him to be in control of our lives and the future? Either He is involved in all the world's operations, or He's involved in none of them.

Before we move on, it is critical that I make a distinction between God's general judgment on the sin of humankind and His supposed judgment on the sin of particular men and women. It is true to say that all God's judgment is because of sin and that He uses disasters in administering judgment. But it is not true to say that every particular disaster is His judgment of some particular sin committed by some particular person or nation.

After 9/11, some people were quick to point out that the disaster was God's judgment on our nation for our rebellion against Him. While that may have been true, how would anyone on earth know for sure?

Almost all the disasters and tragedies that have befallen our nation in the last several years have incited some pundit to declare the tragedy a particular judgment for a particular sin that had been committed in the immediate context of the disaster. The truth is, we don't know the mysteries of God's heart and will. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus warns against playing the armchair prophet. Pilate had murdered some Galileans, and others had been killed when a tower collapsed at Siloam. When asked about it, Jesus said,

Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they

were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

LUKE 13:2-5

Jesus was reminding us that in our fallen world, disasters happen, and they happen to both evil and righteous people without distinction or explanation. It's not up to us to label this one as misfortune or that one as God's judgment but simply, as Jesus pointed out, to ponder the sin in our own hearts.

### *God Cannot Be Discredited by Disasters*

Some people, of course, remove God from the equation entirely; He simply doesn't exist, they argue, and disasters are all the proof we need. Apologist Dinesh D'Souza summarizes this line of reasoning in his book *What's So Great about Christianity*:

If God exists, He is all-powerful. If He is all-powerful, He is in a position to stop evil and suffering. But we know from experience that evil and suffering go on, scandalously, mercilessly, without even a hint of proportion or justice. Thus there cannot be an omnipotent being capable of preventing all this from happening because if there were, He surely would. Therefore God does not exist.<sup>1</sup>

Atheist George Smith speaks for those who would attempt to make this case with tidy logic: "The problem of evil is this. . . . If God knows there is evil but cannot prevent it, he is not omnipotent. If God knows there is evil and can prevent it but desires not to, he is not omnibenevolent."<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes it is sheer emotion rather than cut-and-dried reasoning that provokes such a conclusion. After the 2010 tsunami, a commentator in Scotland's newspaper *The Herald* wrote,

God, if there is a God, should be ashamed of Himself. The sheer enormity of the Asian tsunami disaster, the death, destruction, and havoc it has wreaked, the scale of misery it has caused, must surely test the faith of even the firmest believer. . . . I hope I am right . . . that there is no God. For if there were, then He'd have to shoulder the blame. In my book, He would be as guilty as sin and I'd want nothing to do with Him.<sup>3</sup>

But wait a minute—not so fast. C. S. Lewis, once an atheist himself, saw disasters not as a proof against the existence of God but, reasoning as he did when he came to faith in Christ, as actual proof of God's existence:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of *just* and *unjust*? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in violent reaction against it? . . . Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality—namely my idea of justice—was full of sense. Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole of the

universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. *Dark* would be without meaning.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that we have a strong idea of justice and perfection in a world contaminated with injustice and imperfection gives compelling evidence that a good God does exist.

One truth we often overlook is that massive deaths caused by disaster cannot discredit God any more than a single death can. We know who brought death into the world, and it wasn't God. We must remember that every one of the people who died in the Haiti earthquake would eventually have died anyway. The fact that they died simultaneously is really no more tragic than if their deaths had been spread out over the next several decades. It's just that the sudden and unexpected simultaneous deaths shock us more.

### *God Cannot Be Defined by Disasters*

In the aftermath of every disaster, we often hear something like this: "I could never believe in a God who would allow such awful things to happen to His creatures."

The God these people want to believe in is the "helicopter parent" God who hovers just above us at all times, insulating us from all unpleasantness like an overprotective father. They want a God who guarantees safety, security, and happiness and spares us from all tragedy and pain, even disciplinary pain. God is better than that. He does not indulge our every desire but rather administers discipline to help us become the kind of creatures who can inhabit a blissful eternity.

Those who define God solely by the evil He allows overlook the flip side of their complaint. Yes, there is evil in the world, but there is also an enormous amount of good. If God is not good, as they claim, how do they account for all the good we experience? Is it fair to judge Him for the evil and not credit Him with the good?

In his book *Where Was God?* Erwin Lutzer writes,

Often the same people who ask where God was following a disaster thanklessly refuse to worship and honor Him for years of peace and calmness. They disregard God in good times, yet think He is obligated to provide help when bad times come. They believe the God they dishonor when they are well should heal them when they are sick; the God they ignore when they are wealthy should rescue them from impending poverty; and the God they refuse to worship when the earth is still should rescue them when it begins to shake.

We must admit that God owes us nothing. Before we charge God with not caring, we must thank Him for those times when His care is very evident. We are ever surrounded by undeserved blessings. Even in His silence, He blesses us.<sup>5</sup>

In a world that contains tragedies, we must realize that they're vastly outnumbered by blessings. A little clear thinking underlines the point that we can't allow others to define God for us. The Bible and good common sense erase a lot of confusion.

There's no denying that we live in a world where many bad things happen, and much of it seems undeserved. "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Dinesh D'Souza asks. "The

Christian answer is that there are no good people. None of us deserves the life that we have, which is a gratuitous gift from God.”<sup>6</sup>

God is loving, and His gifts abound in our world. So does His discipline. That is why we must refuse to let only one side of the equation define God for us.

*God Cannot Be Defeated by Disasters*

When disasters happen, we are sometimes tempted to think that God’s purposes have been thwarted. Let’s allow God to speak for Himself on this subject:

I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God, and there is none like Me,  
Declaring the end from the beginning,  
And from ancient times things that are not yet done,  
Saying, “My counsel shall stand,  
And I will do all My pleasure.” . . .  
Indeed I have spoken it;  
I will also bring it to pass.  
I have purposed it;  
I will also do it.

ISAIAH 46:9-11

One reason we fear disasters is that their occurrence makes it seem that God is not in control, that somehow things have slipped out of His grasp. At such times we must remember that a single thread in the grand tapestry cannot comprehend the pattern of the whole. Our view is too limited to perceive any ultimate meaning in a calamity—how our present suffering fits into God’s ultimate purpose. Yet, as Paul tells us, “We know that all things



work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Like every other piece of this entangled subject, this verse is easy to confuse in its meaning. As James Montgomery Boice tells us, Paul is not saying that evil things are good:

The text does not teach that sickness, suffering, persecution, grief, or any other such thing is itself good. On the contrary, these things are evils. Hatred is not love. Death is not life. Grief is not joy. The world is filled with evil. But what the text teaches . . . is that God uses these things to effect his own good ends for people. God brings good out of evil.<sup>7</sup>

God brought good out of the work by which Satan meant to destroy Job’s faith. And He used the awful reality of the crucifixion of a perfect Christ for wonderful purposes. In God’s wise and powerful hands, evil events are used as tools to work toward good ends.

The clue is in the ordering of the words in the original language: “We know that for those who love God,” the Greek text reads, “He is working.” In other words, God is ceaselessly, energetically, and purposefully active on their behalf. He is involved; He is busy creating a glorious destiny for those who love Him.

The phrase Paul uses to describe how God works on our behalf is interesting. He says that “all things work together.” This expression is translated from the Greek word *sunergeo*, from which we get our word *synergism*. Synergism is the working together of various elements to produce an effect greater than, and often completely different from, the sum of each element acting separately.

So things do not just work out somehow if we let nature take its course. God causes this synergism to happen. He is the One who stirs the mix! This is why disaster cannot defeat God or derail His plans and purposes. All nature is under His control: *all things* work together. The One who controls nature holds us in His hands.

Donald Grey Barnhouse explains that the “we know” part of Romans 8:28 is a superb antidote to the fear of disaster:

It is possible here and now for us to know that all things work together for our good. To lay hold of that fact is to calm the turbulence of life and to bring quiet and confidence into the whole of life. Nothing can touch me unless it passes through the will of God. God has a plan for my life. God is working according to a fixed, eternal purpose.<sup>8</sup>

In the following poem, Annie Johnson Flint uses the intricate workings of factory machinery to give us a creative picture of God’s complete control of “all things”:

*In a factory building, there are wheels and gearings,  
There are cranks, pulleys, belts either tight or slack—  
Some are whirling swiftly, some are turning slowly,  
Some are thrusting forward, some are pulling back;  
Some are smooth and silent, some are rough and noisy,  
Pounding, rattling, clanking, moving with a jerk;  
In a wild confusion in a seeming chaos,  
Lifting, pushing, driving—but they do their work.  
From the mightiest lever to the smallest cog or gear,  
All things move together for the purpose planned;*

WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?

*And behind the working is a mind controlling,  
And a force directing, and a guiding hand.  
So all things are working for the Lord's beloved;  
Some things might be hurtful if alone they stood;  
Some might seem to hinder; some might draw  
us backward;  
But they work together, and they work for good,  
All the thwarted longings, all the stern denials,  
All the contradictions, hard to understand.  
And the force that holds them, speeds them and  
retards them,  
Stops and starts and guides them—is our  
Father's hand.<sup>9</sup>*

Several years ago my wife and I were reminded of an inspiring example of one couple who trusted God's control over all things. While we were visiting Jerusalem, some friends took us to lunch at the American Colony Hotel. As we sat down to eat, we were handed a small brochure that told the story of the hotel and its restaurant.

I was shocked to discover that the hotel belonged to the family of Horatio Spafford, the man who wrote the words to my favorite Gospel hymn, "It Is Well with My Soul." I have often recounted the tragic circumstances that surrounded the writing of that song, but the brochure included facts I hadn't known. Here is that story:

In 1871, Horatio Spafford lived in the Lake View suburb of Chicago. He was a young lawyer with a wife, Anna, and four little girls. In October of that year, the whole center of the city was devastated by fire. No one is certain how the fire started, but it killed hundreds of people and destroyed whole sections of the city.

All across town, people were wandering homeless and hungry. The Spaffords were deeply involved in doing what they could to help families in distress. But it was no short-term ministry. Two years later, exhausted from their work, they planned a trip to Europe for rest. But at the last minute, business kept Horatio in town. Anna and the four girls boarded a ship and left the harbor.

Late one night during the voyage, another ship rammed the steamer, which sank within twenty minutes. One of only forty-seven who were rescued, Anna was pulled from the water, unconscious and floating on a piece of debris. But the four Spafford girls perished. Anna sent a telegram from Paris to her husband: "Saved alone. What shall I do?" She remarked to another passenger that God had given her four daughters and taken them away and that perhaps someday she would understand why.

Horatio boarded a ship to find his wife and bring her home. When the ship's path crossed the very point where his daughters had been lost, the captain called him to his cabin and told him so. Horatio, deeply moved, found a piece of paper from the hotel in which he had stayed before the voyage. He jotted down the words to "It Is Well with My Soul," now one of the world's favorite hymns.

Back in Chicago, the couple tried to start over again. A son was born to them, and then another daughter. Maybe the worst was over. But then, another tragedy: the boy died of scarlet fever at four years old.

Inexplicably, the family's church took the view that these tragedies were surely the punishment of a wrathful God for some unspecified sin on the part of the Spaffords. An elder in a church he had helped build, Horatio was asked to leave rather than being taken in and comforted by a healing community.

In 1881, the little family left the United States to begin a new

life in Jerusalem. They rented a house in the Old City section, with the goal of imitating the lives of the first-century Christians as closely as possible. Soon the family was widely known for their love and service to the needy, as well as for their devotion to the Scriptures. Even today, the Spafford Children's Center serves Jerusalem and the West Bank by providing health care and educational support to as many as thirty thousand children annually under the leadership of the Spaffords' descendants.<sup>10</sup>

Anna and Horatio Spafford suffered severe testings of their faith, but they did not blame God for their suffering. They knew He was in control of all things, and because He could not be defeated, neither could they. Their faith allowed them to learn through their testings and to use their pain to bless others and further the Gospel.

I hope this section has helped lift the fog that obscures our understanding of God's connection with disaster. When our pain leads us to see Him as uninvolved in calamity, powerless to control it, or defeated by it, we saw off the limb that supports us, and we plunge into fear. This leaves us without hope, for an all-powerful God is our only solace in tragic times.

Now we will look at ways in which the experience of disaster can actually bless us.

## **NATURAL DISASTERS AND THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF MAN**

In the midst of pain and grief, it's hard to realize that disasters can bring vital benefits. Just as destructive forest fires clean out the underbrush that would eventually stifle the trees, disasters in our lives can cause us to see our blind spots and address them with clearer vision.

*Disasters Teach Us to Repent of Our Sin*

Earlier in this chapter we discussed an occasion from Luke 13 in which Jesus refers to two contemporary tragedies. Did the victims die because they were more sinful than the survivors? No, He replies; we all perish unless we repent. In other words, the greatest natural disaster of all happened in the Garden of Eden; the rest is collateral damage. The Fall makes us all victims unless we allow Jesus Christ to handle the problem of our sin.

When you read about people losing their lives in fires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and tsunamis, do you ever wonder how many of them were prepared to meet their God? Does the question cause you to examine your own readiness (2 Corinthians 13:5)? Our readiness to meet God greatly reduces our fear of disaster.

Many factors are at work in the scope of a disaster, but one of them is surely the work of God drawing our attention to Himself. In truth, we are surrounded by unrecognized tragedies and disasters: a dark, sex-obsessed, violent culture; the rapid decline of morality; the deterioration of Christian influence in our world. How many more are victims to these man-made poisons than to the forces of wind and weather? Sometimes it requires the dramatic power of a hurricane or some other force in nature to capture our attention and turn our minds to matters of eternity.

God uses disasters and tragedies to accomplish His perfect will in us and through us—and sometimes to bring us to Himself in the first place. In the church I pastor, almost all who give testimony to their faith at their baptism have one thing in common: they are brought to Christ through some difficult experience. Often it is the loss of a loved one or a divorce or the loss of employment. God uses difficulty and disaster to get the attention of those He is pursuing.

How does this work? Erwin Lutzer tells us,

Disasters might drive some people away from God, but for others it has the opposite effect, driving them into the arms of Jesus. The destruction of nature has helped them distinguish the temporary from the permanent. Disasters remind the living that tomorrow is uncertain, so we must prepare for eternity today. Today is the accepted time; today is the day of salvation.

When disasters come, God is not on trial, *we are*.<sup>11</sup>

### *Disasters Teach Us to Reflect on God's Goodness*

When I watch reports of natural disasters as they are instantaneously delivered to us through the media, my first thoughts are for the lives lost and the families torn apart. I also experience a sense of gratitude that my family and people I know were not touched by these events.

I used to feel guilty about this in the same way I felt guilty about people who got cancer at the same time I did but did not survive. But I have since come to understand that it is proper to be grateful that I have been saved even while I mourn for those who have been lost.

Mark Mittelberg writes,

It's common in the middle of a drought . . . to forget that rain is the norm. Or in the middle of a flood to forget that floods rarely happen. Or when bad news comes from the doctor to forget that, for most of us, this comes after many years of relatively good health.<sup>12</sup>

God's blessings abound; they are the norm, and it's proper to be grateful for them at all times, regardless of surrounding circumstances.

*Disasters Teach Us to Respond to the Hurting*

The Southern California wildfires of 2003 and 2007 destroyed the homes of several of our church families and decimated a community in the mountains above our place of worship. I had never experienced anything that touched our church so directly.

To this day, people still talk about the ways they were changed for the better from an event that couldn't have seemed any worse. When the devil sends a wildfire, God sends the holy fire of Spirit-filled followers of Christ. When the devil sends a flood, God sends the refreshment of living water.

During those tragic events, many of our people did exactly what Job's friends did at first: they sat with hurting people. Sometimes silent presence is the most powerful ministry. When folks are grieving, for example, spiritual rationalizations and the wholesale quoting of Scripture verses can fall flat. People don't need our answers—they simply need our shoulders to cry on, our company in the darkness. These are the moments when the church of Jesus Christ is at its very best. And when someone finally turns to us and asks why, we can say, "I'd love to sit down with you over coffee and work on those questions together soon. But right now, I'm here to serve you. What can I do?"

In 1940, C. S. Lewis published his first popular book on Christian doctrine, *The Problem of Pain*. It was an intellectual attack on the view that suffering and evil rule out the existence of God. It was a book for the mind—and a good one. But it didn't really touch the heart; that came twenty-one years later, when Lewis found himself writing a very different kind of book.



In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis's aching sadness and even anger radiated from every page. He had lost his beloved wife to bone cancer, and he was overwhelmed with sorrow. He was no longer interested in debating points; now his heart was broken. This new book held more questions than answers. It read as a journey of mourning that somehow arrived at a safe harbor for faith.

When he finished writing, Lewis understood that the world had never seen him this raw and emotional. He decided to publish *A Grief Observed* under the pen name N. W. Clerk. Yet soon an army of loving friends were bringing him "Clerk's" book, saying, "Here, perhaps this little volume will help you." Lewis had to come out from behind his pseudonym and admit that he was the book's author and the owner of the pain it displayed. It was the book born out of pain, even more than the book with the intellectual answers, that ministered to others who were suffering.<sup>13</sup>

Disasters perform a painful surgery in our inmost parts, but the Physician's hand is tender and sure. He wants to make us better, stronger, more capable of ministry in a world of broken hearts. As we minister to our own pain and the pain of others, we take on a growing resemblance to the Savior who healed pain everywhere He encountered it.

### *Disasters Teach Us to Remember God's Promise*

God has given us a spectacular, all-encompassing promise that provides the ultimate cure for our fear of disaster. Revelation 21:3-4 says, "I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.'"

Disasters remind us that God doesn't intend for this fallen earth, with its death, disaster, and corruption, to be our permanent home. As the old spiritual says, "This world is not my home; I'm just a passin' through." The calamities we experience here are only temporary phenomena. Each disaster reminds us that a disaster-free eternity awaits us and inspires our hearts to long for it.

Paul affirms this longing: "The earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. . . . For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now" (Romans 8:19, 22).

Dinesh D'Souza sums up how this promise of God assures our ultimate victory over disaster:

The only way for us to really triumph over evil and suffering is to live forever in a place where those things do not exist. It is the claim of Christianity that there is such a place and that it is available to all who seek it. No one can deny that, if this claim is true, then evil and suffering are exposed as temporary hardships and injustices. They are as transient as our brief, mortal lives. In that case God has shown us a way to prevail over evil and suffering, which are finally overcome in the life to come.<sup>14</sup>

### *Disasters Teach Us to Rely on God's Presence and His Power*

We began this chapter by looking into the terrible experience of a man named Job. It's fitting that we return to his life again to discover how the tragic events of his life fully played themselves out.

Job experiences severe depression as he struggles to deal with his losses. But soon he finds within himself a powerful, trusting commitment to God. "Though He slay me," Job resolves, "yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15).

WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?

By the grace of God, Job manages to maintain his strong faith and reliance on God, certain that something better is in store for him:

I know that my Redeemer lives,  
And He shall stand at last on the earth;  
And after my skin is destroyed, this I know,  
That in my flesh I shall see God,  
Whom I shall see for myself,  
And my eyes shall behold, and not another.  
How my heart yearns within me!

JOB 19:25-27

Finally God speaks to Job and his friends. But instead of explaining His ways, He proclaims His almighty power and puts to shame their bumbling attempts to explain suffering. On hearing the voice of God, Job humbles himself and repents of his questioning of God:

I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear,  
But now my eye sees You.  
Therefore I abhor myself,  
And repent in dust and ashes.

JOB 42:5-6

But that wasn't the end of Job's story. In the last chapter of his book we are told that "the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning," giving him a superabundance of livestock and ten more children (Job 42:12-15). Thus Job was amply rewarded for his patience, his faith, and his complete trust in God's power.

We should not take this to mean that all who suffer disaster

will have everything restored in this life. The promise is that no matter what those who love God suffer here, a time is coming when God's blessings will cause us to forget every pain we ever endured.

Famed devotional author Hannah Whitall Smith was plagued with terrible pain and unanswered questions. It seemed to her, just as it seems to you and me, that no one could possibly understand what she was experiencing. She didn't know where to turn for help until she was told of a deeply spiritual Christian woman living nearby:

I summoned up my courage, therefore, one afternoon, and went to see her, and poured out my troubles; expecting that of course she would take a deep interest in me, and would be at great pains to do all she could to help me. . . . When I had finished my story, and had paused, expecting sympathy and consideration, she simply said, "Yes, all you say may be very true, but then in spite of it all, there is God."

I waited a few minutes for something more, but nothing came, and my friend and teacher had the air of having said all that was necessary. "But," I continued, "surely you did not understand how very serious and perplexing my difficulties are."

"Oh, yes, I did," replied my friend, "but then, as I tell you, there is God." And I could not induce her to make any other answer. It seemed to me most disappointing and unsatisfactory. I felt that my peculiar and really harrowing experiences could not be met by anything so simple as merely the statement, "Yes, but there is God." . . .

At last . . . I came gradually to believing, that, being my Creator and Redeemer, He must be enough; and at last a conviction burst upon me that He really was enough, and my eyes were opened to the fact of the absolute and utter all-sufficiency of God.<sup>15</sup>

*God is enough.* Do these words of guidance seem to you as they did at first to Hannah—a trite oversimplification? They could be viewed that way until, like Hannah, we think a little more deeply. The fact is, God *must* be enough, for if He isn't, where do we go for plan B? If the God of heaven and earth—who is mightier than all the world's armies, who can cause the earth to melt into the sea—is not Lord of your crisis, you're in deep trouble. And so am I.

God *is* sufficient. He is in control. He holds the destiny of the galaxies in His hands, all the while knowing the precise number of hairs on your head. Above all else, He loves you and chose to pour that love out, not in words, but in blood.

So let the winds blow. Let the earth itself open beneath us. We find our fortress in God alone . . . and He is enough:

God is our refuge and strength,  
A very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear,  
Even though the earth be removed,  
And though the mountains be carried into the midst of  
the sea;  
Though its waters roar and be troubled,  
Though the mountains shake with its swelling.

PSALM 46:1-3