

WHERE WAS GOD?

ANSWERS TO TOUGH QUESTIONS
ABOUT GOD AND NATURAL DISASTERS

ERWIN W. LUTZER



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For R. C. Sproul, a friend who never tires of reminding us
that God is sovereign both in history and in nature, and that
our trust in Him is well placed.



*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging. . . .
“Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.”
The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

PSALM 46:1-3, 10-11

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A HEART FOR THE HURTING

This book was birthed in my heart while I was watching a CNN special report on the children who survived the deadly October 8, 2005, earthquake in India and Pakistan. As I watched volunteers trying to help the frightened youngsters, the question that came to my mind was, “What kind of a God would allow such a disaster to happen?”

These children—most of them orphaned—were bandaged and bruised. Some had eyes swollen shut, while others sat in stoney silence, evidently in shock at what they had experienced. Now without adequate facilities, volunteers were doing what they could to provide comfort and the basic necessities to the survivors. But many people trapped in remote villages had no help whatsoever.

Without a doubt, many of those children have already died since the CNN special was aired, and those who survived face a life of loneliness, heartache, and pain. In all, eighty thousand people died in the 2005 quake and many times that number sustained injuries.

This earthquake came right on the heels of the largest natural disaster in modern history, the tsunami that swept through Sri Lanka, Thailand, India, and a number of other countries in December 2004. The estimated death toll following that disaster is now at 240,000, although no one knows for sure.

As I write this, one year after the tsunami, 2 million people are still homeless and many of them have hardly even begun to put their lives back together. Children are still struggling, families are fragmented, and fifty thousand people are listed as missing. Even today, some people are still searching for a child or relative, hoping against hope that they will yet be found alive. Who can calculate the buckets of tears wept because of disasters like this?

Those of us who live in the United States immediately think of Hurricane Katrina, which washed away much of the Gulf Coast in August 2005. Pictures of the thousands of people gathering aimlessly around the Superdome are etched in our minds. The stories are legion: A mother calls to her child as he is swept away in the rising waters. A family huddled in their attic wave frantically for rescuers, hoping they will be spared. In all, more than one thousand people died, and hundreds of thousands were left behind to try to regain some kind of normalcy. Survivors tell of fighting for insurance payments and living in shelters, knowing that their homes can never be rebuilt. And in the wake of this disaster, many children are still missing.

In all, the 2005 hurricane season was the most active in history: Twenty-seven tropical storms (including fourteen hurricanes) were named. But the devastation in lesser-known disasters is just as terrible for individual families and children. Tragedies on a smaller scale kill and destroy every day, though only the large-scale events make the news.

Some people think we should not seek answers from God or from man. They believe that these disasters are of such gigantic proportions that there cannot possibly be any hidden meaning in them, nor can anything helpful or encouraging be said about them.

I am well aware that little or nothing can be said to ease the pain of those who mourn the loss of loved ones. Parents will hardly be comforted when a Christian tells them that God has some hidden purpose in the loss of their child. A child who has just learned that his parents died in the collapsed house behind him would not be comforted by the assurance that God really does care and that He did this for some better end.

Glib answers can be hurtful, not helpful. Sometimes we just need to sit beside those who grieve, letting them know we care rather than talking to them dispassionately about God's promises and purposes. I've found that it's often better to say nothing than to say something that appears to trivialize the horror. There is a grief that is too deep for words, too deep for explanations, and yes, even too deep for human comfort.

How well I recall the words of Fyodor Dostoyevsky as he

vividly describes the sufferings of small children and wonders about the problem of evil in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Imagine you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature . . . would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?”¹ The famous writer concludes that such torment can never be justified, that no explanation has ever been developed that can sufficiently answer or explain it. The same can be said about the suffering of children in light of natural evils; the suffering is of such magnitude that it seems futile to believe it can ever be justified. Better to simply give no answer than to give an inadequate one.

Keep in mind that although we use the term *natural evil*, we must make a distinction between natural disasters and the evils men do, which can be traced back to choices made by human beings. A tsunami in the middle of an ocean that did not affect us would not be thought of as evil in and of itself; we speak of it as evil only when we see the devastation it brings to the people who share this planet. It becomes evil because we regard suffering and death as evil.

Despite this clarification, however, we need to ask whether the horrific events we have witnessed are compatible with the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. Natural disasters challenge the limits of our faith in a good and caring God. How can we watch the news coverage of orphaned children and have our faith still remain intact? Centuries ago, Asaph,

who wrote many of the Psalms, found his faith slipping when he saw the wicked prosper and the righteous brought low. He begins with an optimistic statement and then reveals his doubts.

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost
my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the pros-
perity of the wicked.

PSALM 73:1-3

Asaph's problem was not a natural disaster, but even so, he found it difficult to reconcile the existence of a good, all-powerful God with the continuing injustice of the world. Who of us has not wondered at the seeming indifference of God toward this planet with its woes, its injustices, and its suffering? In the face of indescribable human grief, God's silence is deafening.

One newsman, commenting on Hurricane Katrina, spoke for many when he said, "If this world is the product of intelligent design, then the designer has some explaining to do." Of course many of us believe that the Designer does *not* owe us an explanation—yet if we believe He has revealed Himself through the Scriptures, we are permitted to have some insight into His ways and purposes in the world.

I have very little to say to those who have angrily made up their minds against the Almighty—except to make this point: When atheists ask why God would permit these evils,

they are actually assuming the existence of God even as they rail against Him. If God did not exist, we could not call anything evil, whether the convulsions of nature or the criminal acts of human beings. In an impersonal atheistic world, whatever is, just *is*. No moral judgments are possible. We shall return to this point later in this book.

Ultimately, we are faced with a question of faith. Those who know God will believe He has a justifiable reason for human tragedy, while others will treat such faith with contempt.

I have written this book with several goals in mind.

First, we should find out what the Bible has to say about the relationship between God and natural disasters. Such a study can either turn people away from God (as we shall see, this is what happened to Voltaire) or it can cause us to worship Him with even more focus and awe. In the end, my goal is to provide assurance that the God of the Bible can be trusted, that His promises to those who believe are worthy of our faith and the basis of our hope.

We'll be answering questions such as:

- Should natural disasters be called an act of God?
- Is God's involvement in such tragedies direct or remote?
- Why should we believe that God is even interested in what happens in His world?
- Did people in the Bible experience disasters? And if so, did they continue to believe?

What it comes down to is this: In light of the suffering that seems so unnecessary in this world, do we still trust God with confidence? Is it even possible to trust a God who allows a disaster that He surely could have kept from happening? Or even more to the point, a disaster for which He takes responsibility?

My intention is not to pry into God's diary and pretend that I can see all of His purposes; indeed, there are plenty of His purposes in these disasters that will never be known to us. Ultimately, only God knows all the whys and the wherefores. Rather, I want to show that natural evil is not incompatible with a good and caring God. In our study we shall encounter much mystery, but hopefully, also much insight that will guide us even as we grieve over the ills of this world.

A second purpose of this book is to warn against the well-intentioned but foolish interpretations that are frequently offered when disasters come. As I shall point out, people of all faiths, including Christians, are often far too ready to read into these events precisely what they want to see. We must caution against the comments of sincere people who are quite convinced that they are able to discern the particulars of the divine mind.

In clarifying these issues, we'll take a look at the differences between the function of natural disasters in the Old Testament and those of today. If we do not make this necessary distinction, I believe we can be led to make all kinds of judgments about disasters that are invalid, and even harmful.

Finally, I have written this book in an attempt to comfort all who doubt and suffer. While it is true that the best explanations do not immediately comfort those who are struggling with grief, for those who believe in the God of the Bible, a source of strength and comfort can be found, even when answers are hard to come by.

Although the first half of this book (chapters 1–4) deals largely with the more theological and philosophical questions about natural evil, the second half (chapters 5–6) is written with pastoral concerns in mind. There I shall urge readers to seek God in faith and keep believing no matter what tragedies come to this planet. I will also discuss our personal struggles with doubt, and what to say when friends ask us about God and His relationship to the tragedies we see every day on television. The epilogue challenges us to prepare for “The Big One.”

For the purposes of this study, I will focus on natural evil rather than evil done by people. Clearly, God does not do the evil perpetuated in a concentration camp; human beings do. But earthquakes and hurricanes cannot be directly connected to decisions made by humans. And, as we shall see, in these tragedies, God’s role is more immediate and direct.

Consequently, many Christians who might not lose their faith because of human evil find it more difficult to maintain their faith in the face of natural disasters. Even Christians wonder whether they can trust a God who allows (or causes) such disasters to occur without so much as a single word of

comfort from heaven. John Keats wrote, *“Is there another life? Shall I awake and find all this a dream? There must be; we cannot be created for this sort of suffering.”*

There can be no doubt that this life will include suffering. But where is God in the face of such pain?

Let us begin our study.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you or a loved one ever suffered a loss due to natural disaster?
2. In the aftermath of a natural disaster, do you tend to question God’s goodness or do you turn to Him for comfort?
3. What passages in the Bible come to mind when thinking of our struggle to believe in God’s goodness in difficult times?



DARE WE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS?

God's silence in the presence of human anguish is one of the greatest mysteries of our existence. When faced with gratuitous human suffering, we are forced to rethink our faith, cope with our doubts, and debate whether God can be trusted. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005, even those who usually exclude God from their thinking were asking hard questions about human existence as they wrestled with the Divine's apparent indifference to human need.

Just as earthquakes create aftershocks, natural disasters create religious aftershocks that challenge the faith of those who believe in God and simultaneously confirm the cynicism of skeptics. Either way, disasters force us to ask ultimate questions.

The Earthquake That Shook Europe

We begin our discussion, not with contemporary disasters but rather one that dates back to November 1, 1755. The Lisbon earthquake was probably the most far-reaching and

well-known natural disaster in modern history, until the tsunami which occurred late in 2004. Other disasters might have been worse, but none was so widely discussed or had such profound ramifications as this one in Portugal.

That morning the sky was bright, calm, and beautiful, but in a moment everything was transformed into frightening chaos. Ironically, the earthquake hit on All Saints' Day, when churches were crowded with worshippers. One would think that the people who sought shelter in the house of God might be spared. Indeed, some people even ran into the churches, seeking shelter by joining the priests who were conducting mass at 9:30 in the morning. Eyewitnesses say that the crowds had the terror of death on their faces, and when the second great shock came, priests and parishioners alike began to shriek, calling out to God for mercy. But heaven was silent to their pleas. Almost all of the churches in Lisbon were reduced to rubble, and the people in them were killed.

After the initial quake, which lasted from six to ten seconds, further aftershocks continued to destroy buildings and homes. Fire immediately broke out across the city, making rescue efforts nearly impossible. This havoc was then followed by a tsunami; its high waves pounded the seaport, tearing ships from their anchors and drowning hundreds of people who sought shelter along the coast. The bright morning sky was darkened with soot and dust. With earth, fire, and water all combining to increase the destruction, even coolheaded observers suspected a design.¹

The earthquake claimed somewhere between thirty and sixty thousand lives, and reduced three-quarters of the city to rubble. Those who remained were forced to rethink many of the important issues of human existence. All throughout Europe there seemed to be a whole new willingness to reopen questions about life beyond the grave, and many people began to talk about building a civilization based on Christianity with its dogged insistence that hope in this life must be rooted in the next. People were faced with the choice of turning against God or believing that He had the power and intention to redeem the evils of this world.

As might be expected, many people clung to their faith, and others sought out faith in Christ for the first time, having been frightfully reminded that their lives were in constant jeopardy. Some historians even say that the age of revolution in France and the age of the Wesleyan revivals in England may have gained impetus from this catastrophe in Portugal.² But opinions were by no means unanimous as to how the event should be interpreted. This highlights the difficulty of reading the Divine Mind.

An Interpretation, Please!

The people of Lisbon searched for meaning amid the rubble of destroyed homes and cartloads of dead bodies. Not surprisingly, many believed the earthquake was an act of divine judgment against a sinful seaport city. A famous Jesuit spoke for many when he said, “Learn, O Lisbon, that the destroyers

of our houses, palaces, churches and convents, the cause of death of so many people and of the flames that devoured such vast treasures are your abominable sins.”³ After all, the quake came on All Saints’ Day, so many assumed God was saying the sins of the saints were so grievous that they merited immediate judgment. What puzzled some, however, was that a street of brothels was left largely intact.

Predictably, Protestants were inclined to say that the earthquake was a judgment against the Jesuits who founded the city. After all, the Inquisition was in full force and tens of thousands of so-called heretics were being brutally murdered. The Jesuits responded by saying that the quake revealed the anger of God because the Inquisition had become too lax.

A Franciscan priest gave his interpretation a twist, arguing that the earthquake was a form of divine mercy. After all, he reasoned, Lisbon deserved much worse: God had every right to destroy the whole city because of its wickedness. Thus he marveled at the restraint of God in allowing some people to live. God graciously did just enough to send a warning and chose to spare some in the city as an act of undeserved mercy so that they could repent.⁴

The parishioners held to the general consensus that this tragedy had to be interpreted in light of a transcendent world. They felt that God was somehow trying to communicate that there is a world beyond this one, a world that can give meaning to the unpredictable and haphazard existence of today. Sermons on the earthquake were preached for years to come.

Whenever tragedy strikes we have a tendency to interpret it in light of what we believe God is trying to say. Back in 2004, some Muslims believed that Allah struck Southeast Asia with a tsunami at Christmastime because the season is so filled with immorality, abomination, alcohol, and the like. And following Katrina, some Muslims opined that Allah was heaping vengeance on the United States for the war in Iraq.

On the other hand, a Christian reporter in Israel said that he saw a parallel between the Jewish settlers being forced out of the Gaza Strip and the people being forced out of New Orleans. His implication was that Katrina was a judgment from God for America's support of Israel's decision to vacate parts of the land in favor of the Palestinians. In a further display of supposed divine insight, Pat Robertson suggested that the stroke that ended Ariel Sharon's rule in Israel was God's judgment for having divided "God's land."

There can be little doubt that controversy surrounds the interpretation of natural disasters. This was brought home to me when I was reading the story of John Wycliffe, the great Protestant Bible translator who taught his Oxford University students how to die for the faith. (More than three hundred of his disciples were mercilessly killed for translating and preaching God's Word.)

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In 1378, Wycliffe retired from public life to continue his studies and writing at Oxford. In 1381, a peasants' revolt occurred, and one of the leaders of the uprising was John Ball, who had reportedly been a disciple of Wycliffe. Wycliffe disowned the revolt, but the damage was done and he was accused of being an accomplice. Furthermore, the rebels had killed the archbishop of Canterbury, replacing him with William Courtenay, an enemy of Wycliffe.

The following year, the hostile archbishop called a counsel to condemn Wycliffe's statements. When an earthquake came during the proceedings, Wycliffe interpreted it as a sign of divine displeasure, a judgment against those who sought his ousting. Courtenay, however, claimed that the land was breaking wind to expel Wycliffe's foul heresies!⁵

Clearly, people see in natural disasters exactly what they want to see. I'm reminded of the remark, "We know that we have created God in our own image when we are convinced that He hates all the same people we do." Disasters often become a mirror in which our own convictions and wishes are reflected.

All of this is a warning that we must be careful about what we say about such tragedies. If we say too much, we may err, thinking we can read the fine print of God's purposes. But if we say nothing, we give the impression that there is no message we can learn from calamities. As we'll see later, I believe that God does speak through these events, but we must be cautious about thinking we know the details of His agenda.

Is This the Best of All Possible Worlds?

Voltaire was living during the Lisbon quake and it affected him deeply. In order to understand his reaction, we have to first be introduced to the philosopher Gottfried von Leibniz, who lived a few decades before the Lisbon quake (1646–1716). He was the first philosopher I know of to write a *theodicy*, a defense of God and His ways in the world.

Think through this bit of philosophical reasoning: Leibniz taught that God had before Him an infinite number of possible worlds, but because God is good, He chose *this* world, which is “the best of all possible worlds,” and furthermore, God ordered nature to serve the best of all possible ends. After all, a good God who was sovereign would, of course, do only what was both best and right. Leibniz did not condone evil, but said it must first be a part of a grand scheme, intended for ultimate good. Given the ends He wished to accomplish, this was the best God could do.

Needless to say, after the Lisbon earthquake, people had to ask whether this was indeed “the best of all possible worlds,” and if the laws of nature were ordained for the best possible ends. If God was faced with an infinite number of worlds and chose this one, then we rightfully have to ask what the *worst* of all possible worlds would have looked like!

Voltaire was convinced that the Lisbon earthquake put an end to the optimism of those who thought God always acted for the best. Voltaire set out to ridicule the convictions of Christians who believed that there could be some ultimate

hidden meaning in the suffering of the world. For him, nothing good could come out of the tragedy at Lisbon, either in this world or the next. He even wrote a poem about the earthquake:

*“This misery,” ye say, “Is others’ good.”
 Yes; from my mouldering body should be born
 A thousand worms, when death has closed my pain.
 Fine consolation this in my distress! . . .
 But how conceive a God supremely good,
 Who heaps his favours on the sons he loves
 Yet scatters evil with as large a hand? . . .
 Tormented atoms in a bed of mud,
 Devoured by death, a mockery of fate.⁶*

In a letter to a friend he opined,

We shall find it difficult to discover how the laws of movement operate in such fearful disasters *in the best of all possible worlds*—where a hundred thousand ants, our neighbors, are crushed in a second on our ant-heaps, half dying undoubtedly in inexpressible agonies, beneath debris from which it was impossible to extricate them, families all over Europe reduced to beggary, and the fortunes of a hundred merchants . . . swallowed up in the ruins of Lisbon.⁷

He went on to say that he hoped that the Catholic Inquisitors were crushed like all the others in the quake! He railed against clerics who thought this was a divine judgment on the city. And Voltaire wasn't finished. He went on to write *Candide*, the story of a boy expelled from Paradise who nonetheless believed the world into which he was thrust was "the best of all worlds." With sarcasm and wit, Voltaire describes one tragedy after another, as the boy continues to affirm that it is all for the best.

For example, Candide meets his favorite philosopher, Dr. Pangloss (a follower of Leibniz), who believes that all things happen by necessity and are for the best. After seeing the Lisbon quake, Pangloss says, "All this is for the best; for, if there is a volcano at Lisbon, it cannot be anywhere else; for it is impossible that things should not be where they are; for all is well."⁸

Later in the story, the country's wise men decide that earthquakes can be prevented by burning a few people in a slow fire. So these sages round up a few Jews, along with Candide and his philosopher friend, Dr. Pangloss, and lock them up in prison for a week. They then march through the streets, with miters on their heads bearing strange paintings. Candide is flogged as a hymn is being sung. The Jews are burned and Pangloss is hanged. On the same day, the earth quakes again with a fearful crash.

Candide, terrified, dumbfounded, bewildered, bleeding, and quivering says to himself, "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others? [I could] let it pass that I was

flogged . . . but O my dear Pangloss! The greatest of philosophers! Must I see you hanged without knowing why!”⁹

You get the point: As the book progresses, Candide affirms that rape, theft, murder, bankruptcy, and other untold human sufferings must all be optimistically accepted as the best of all possible worlds. With biting sarcasm Voltaire makes a mockery of the notion that God acts for the best, or that He chose the best plan for the world. Voltaire came to the conclusion that evil is unredeemable, that we have no right to discern a higher end to human suffering and tragedy. In this way Voltaire heaped contempt on Christians who believed that surely God had a legitimate purpose in such evils.

We must pause for a moment and ask, *Is this the best of all possible worlds?* If we say yes, the answer seems obviously wrong. Paradise would be the best of all possible worlds, not our world with its suffering, corruption, and endless tragedy.

Looking through our lens, no one could reasonably say this is the best of all possible worlds. If it were, then theoretically, we couldn't improve it. Yet the book of Hebrews uses the word *better* thirteen times, and says that the biblical heroes longed for a “better country—a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:16), and that God has planned something better for us (see v. 40). Thus we work hard to make things better because we know this is not the best the world can be.

Yet it's difficult to be completely satisfied with such an answer. There is more to this matter than we might initially realize. The Bible does teach that God created all things for His

own pleasure and for His own glory. And we read, “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1:11). If all things work to the glory of God, if indeed the details of history—along with human and natural evil—all contribute to His eternal purpose, wouldn’t it be accurate to say that this plan is the best, if only we could see it from God’s point of view? Does He see our tragedies through a different lens? Might there be a good and wise reason for the madness?

Voltaire was right in saying that from our point of view this is not the best of all possible worlds, but he was wrong in assuming that there could be no hidden purposes in an earthquake. As Christians we believe that God is able to use tragedies for the best of all possible purposes and goals. God has not allowed His creation to spin out of control; He must have a morally sufficient reason that justifies our pain and suffering. So, although we have to look at these disasters through our eyes, we must also view them through the eyes of God as revealed in the Bible. We see events unfold in time, but God sees them from the standpoint of eternity.

Obviously, this a topic to which we will have to return in a future chapter.

The Christian Hope

According to Voltaire, we are insects living for a few seconds on atoms of mud, and cannot understand the designs of an

infinite Creator. And he is quite right—if we reject the Bible, as he did. But in doing so, we are left without promises and without hope. If we have no Word from the Creator, the world of nature is a brute fact, revealing no hidden messages. Left to ourselves, we could never figure out the meaning of our existence, much less the purpose of pain. William James put it honestly when he said that we are like dogs in a library, seeing the print but unable to read the words.

There is a vast difference between the world God originally created and the one that erupts with earthquakes, mudslides, and floods.

But when we turn to the Bible, we are offered insight; not all of our questions are answered, but at least we can see that God has not overlooked the flaws on His planet. He is neither indifferent nor unaware of what has gone wrong with nature. For openers, there is a vast difference between the world God origi-

nally created and the one that erupts with earthquakes, mudslides, and floods. Something is out of joint, and our world awaits God to make it right. We are living on a once perfect but now flawed planet. Sin changed everything.

Here is the way Paul put it in Romans:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own

choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

ROMANS 8:18-22

Paul begins by saying that this present suffering can't compare to the future glory of those who know God. Suffering is redeemable; the future will make up for the present. The last chapter has yet to be written. Answers that elude us in this life might be answered in the next.

Paul then connects the curse of nature with man's sin. He points out that man's state of sin was his own doing, but God subjected nature to the curse even though it had no part in the decision: "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice." Mankind, now tainted with sin, could not live in a perfect sinless environment. So Creation became an impersonal victim of Adam's personal choice to rebel.

Nature is cursed because man is cursed; natural evil—if we call it such—is therefore a reflection of moral evil, in that both are savage, ruthless, and damaging. Nature is not as bad as it could be: Rain is followed by sunshine, a tsunami is followed by calm, and eventually an earthquake is followed by stillness. Just so, we as human beings are not as evil as we could be. But we are a mixture of good and evil, and all too often evil takes the upper hand. Nature is therefore a mirror in which we see ourselves.

When we look at Hurricane Katrina we should see a picture of the evil side of human nature—powerful, heartless, and randomly cruel. In an age that is indifferent to sin, natural disasters hold up a mirror that tells us what our sin looks like to God. Sin always leaves a trail of death and destruction with ongoing painful consequences. Both the physical world and mankind await a liberation that only God can bring about.

We can engage in a fight against nature because we are armed with the knowledge that this world is not normal; it is not what it once was. So we fight disease, subdue weeds, and use fuel to warm our homes. We cooperate with nature when

God has promised to transform this present world by removing the curse of sin and bringing about an eternity of justice and righteousness.

we can, and subdue it to our benefit. Just so, we also fight against sin in our own lives, within our nation, and within the world. We fight the curse wherever it might be found.

The creation “waits in eager expectation” for its deliverance. The Greek word used in this verse fittingly describes the attitude of a

man who scans the horizon searching for the first glimpse of the dawn break of glory.¹⁰ Nature is pictured as if on tiptoes, waiting for its own release from the curse. Someday it will be “brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” God will not allow redeemed people to live in an unredeemed environment. So when God’s people are fully and finally redeemed, nature will follow suit. Better days lie ahead.

We can agree with Voltaire on one point: From our point of view, this is not the best of all possible worlds. But we also strongly affirm that God has promised to transform this present world by removing the curse of sin and bringing about an eternity of justice and righteousness. We have the possibility of such hope only if an intelligent, powerful God is behind what we see on our TV screens when a city lies in ruins.

Wind, Rain, and a Collapsed House

The Lisbon earthquake split Europe between earth and heaven.¹¹ On the one hand, the tragedy stimulated interest in the comforts of religion, especially the Christian faith. Church attendance increased and people were more likely to be attentive to eternity, and loyal to the church and God. But it also spurred the development of naturalism and the growth of the secular Enlightenment.

The great philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote a book about the disaster and concluded that earthquakes could be scientifically explained using physics and chemistry. He argued that there was no need to bring God into the discussion about the cause of the quake, claiming that God was necessary for what could not be explained, but was quite unnecessary once it was determined that nature was behaving according to various natural laws of physical motion.

The Lisbon quake forced a decision: The heavenly minded were motivated to become more devoted to their religious commitments; the earthly minded were more inclined to ex-

plain all of life without reference to a God who interacted with the world. In other words, people made a choice to either turn to God, or to turn away from Him in disappointment and anger. Those who turned away did so because they trusted their own opinions more than those of the Bible.

Natural disasters have a way of dividing humanity, getting to the bottom of our values and character. They have a way of revealing our secret loves and personal convictions. Jesus told a story about a natural disaster that exposed the inner lives of two neighbors.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

MATTHEW 7:24-27

Consider that on a beautiful sunny afternoon, these two houses looked identical. Only the powerful wind distinguished between the two. Disasters clarify our values, challenge our faith, and reveal who we really are. If we are rooted in the promises of Jesus, we can endure. If not, we will be

swept away by our own human philosophies and narrow interpretations.

To those who find themselves distantly related to God—God as an idea, God as a construct, God as a last resort in difficulty—natural disasters are only a further reason to disbelieve in God and His care. But as for those who have tested God by His Word and His promises, their faith will survive the onslaught of past disasters as well as those that are yet to come.

This brief introduction to natural disasters serves two purposes: First, we must be warned to not quickly read into these events our own specific view of what God is up to. We've already learned that people will always give these disasters an interpretation compatible with their religion, their understanding of sin, and their own convictions of what they think God should do. Let's avoid these extremes.

But let us not go to the opposite extreme and speak as if the Bible is silent about these matters. I disagree with Eastern Orthodox theologian David B. Hart, who is quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying that we are not warranted to “utter odious banalities about God's inscrutable counsels or blasphemous suggestions that all this mysteriously serves God's good ends.”¹²

If natural disasters do not serve God's good ends, then we are either confronted with a God who is too weak to make evil serve higher ends, or too evil to do what is good and just. Yes, there is a great danger in claiming to know too much

about God's purpose. But there is also a danger of being silent, of not saying what the Bible allows us to say about these horrific events. Natural disasters do have an important message that we dare not ignore.

Second, we must realize that to ask why natural disasters happen is similar to asking why people die. Six thousand people die every hour on this planet, most of them in anguish—much like those who die in an earthquake or tidal wave. Many more children die of starvation every day than the total number of people who died when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. The only reason natural disasters attract our attention is that they dramatically intensify the daily occurrence of death and destruction. Like death itself, natural disasters will be with us until God transforms the present order. And, as I shall explain later, the worst natural disasters still lie ahead.

In the next chapter we turn to the question of God's relationship to natural disasters. Are they acts of God? Should we protect God's reputation by saying that disasters are simply the result of fallen nature? Or should we blame the devil for these acts? And what are the implications of our answers?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you think God wants us to search for answers regarding God's plan and natural disasters?
2. In what ways do you think natural disasters mirror the evil side of human nature?
3. How do natural disasters "get to the bottom of our values and character," exposing our inner life?
4. What do you think of Immanuel Kant's idea that if natural disasters can be explained by natural laws, it is unnecessary to bring God into the discussion?

ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION

- ¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Constance Garnett, trans., *The Brothers Karamazov*, Modern Library Series (New York: Random House, 1995), 272.

CHAPTER 1

- ¹ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 142.
- ² A. J. Conyers, *The Eclipse of Heaven* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 13.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 13. Quotation is from Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1957), 137.
- ⁴ Conyers, *The Eclipse of Heaven*, 13.
- ⁵ John Woodbridge, ed., *Great Leaders of the Christian Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 174.
- ⁶ Joseph McCabe, ed. and trans., *Selected Works of Voltaire* (London: Watts and Co., 1911), at <http://courses.essex.ac.uk/cs/cs101/VOLT/Lisbon2.html> last accessed 5/2/06.
- ⁷ <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/homes/VSA/letters/24.11.1755.html>; last accessed 3/24/06.
- ⁸ Voltaire, *Candide* (New York: New American Library, 1961), 26.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ¹⁰ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1955), 115.
- ¹¹ Edward Rothstein, "Seeking Justice, of Gods or the Politicians," *The New York Times* (September 8, 2005).
- ¹² David B. Hart, "Tremors of Doubt," *OpinionJournal* (December 31, 2004), at <http://www.opinionjournal.com/taste/?id=110006097>; last accessed 4/19/06.

CHAPTER 2

- ¹ <http://www.usatoday.com/weather/tornado/storms/1999/w503tor0.htm> last accessed 5/2/06.