

FOREWORD BY FRANKLIN GRAHAM

# AN ACT OF GOD?

Answers to tough  
questions about God's role  
in 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, NIV*



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# Foreword

IN NEARLY FOUR DECADES of being an eyewitness and responder to the destruction of natural disasters—from droughts in Africa to tsunamis in Indonesia to earthquakes in Haiti—there is no question in my mind that God’s heart breaks as He watches His creation suffer. For the people caught in the grip of these life-buffeting events, the losses and despair are overwhelming. I’ve heard the question asked over and over again in the aftermath of an “act of God”—where is God in all of this? Why didn’t He do something? It’s a question Erwin Lutzer examines thoroughly in the pages you’re about to read.

Natural disasters have always been part of humans’ lives; many examples of such harrowing experiences are recorded in the Bible. Today, for believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, these unwelcomed events can deepen our fears and derail our faith or can deepen our faith and dispel our fears. How we choose to respond depends on where our faith is placed.

So where is God when these tragedies happen? The Bible

gives us answers, but we don't always discern the fullness of the underlying truth in those answers. Dr. Lutzer does not shy away from asking the tough questions. He poses them and then points us to God's standard: for His ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).

I think you'd agree that people love the beauty and calm of the ocean but loathe its raging waters driven by the fierce winds of hurricanes. People soak in the brilliance of the sun but scorn its heat that scorches the fruit of the soil. People enjoy life's pleasures but despise disease and death. We blame God for allowing bad things to happen yet we call out to Him for help in times of tragedy and loss. In the midst of our hopelessness, we pray for a ray of hope. Why can't God's creation be breathtakingly beautiful and serene every day, every place on earth? Dr. Lutzer zeroes in on a basic truth that many of us have not contemplated: "Nature is cursed because the human heart is cursed by sin."

Yes, the greatest of all natural disasters happens in the human heart . . . the disastrous result of sin. God has used natural disasters since the beginning of time to bring about redemption. He brought a dreadful flood in Noah's day, destroying creation but bringing salvation to one family who believed His warning. He brought devastating famine in Joseph's day to save a nation so that they would believe He is the Sustainer of life. He brought a destructive earthquake the day Jesus Christ gave His life for us on the cross to save people from their sin. The most horrible of all events brought about God's most precious gift—His Son, our Savior. Jesus

Christ was God's provision to redeem men, women, and children from the grip of sin that hovers over human souls.

Do we really believe that storms can draw us closer to the Son? Can they deepen our faith in the One who overshadows the darkness? Is it possible to draw from His strength and overcome? While Scripture does not provide the details as to why God allows and even brings about tragic events, we are to pray for discernment on how to respond as we seek to glorify Him regardless of tumultuous circumstances. He wants us to focus our plea for deliverance on Him. In doing so, those who don't know Him will marvel at the *Source* of our dependence.

What good can come from natural disasters? Many would say "nothing." Yet I have seen multitudes thank the Lord for life's storms because they ran to Christ for salvation. In his book *Storm Warning*, my father writes, "Benevolent hands reach down from heaven to offer us the most hopeful warning and remedy, 'Prepare to meet thy God.'" I believe this is at the heart of what you are about to read. Storms and other natural disasters that disrupt our world are God's megaphone sounding the warning, "Prepare to meet thy God," followed by the most hopeful message for the soul, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me" (John 14:1).

When the roll of thunder makes our hearts pound, when tidal waves flood our minds with fear, when winds threaten to carry us away in hopelessness, trust in Him. Don't blame God for the storms of fallen nature; look for Him in the midst of the storm. Take hold of the One who "has His way in the whirlwind and in the storm, [for] the clouds are the

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dust of His feet” (Nahum 1:3, NKJV). It is by His strength that we can walk through the rubble of life’s storms, reaching for the hands of the fallen and touching the hearts of those who have lost faith. We can take hold of the promises from the One who gives comfort to those who recognize that their need can only be satisfied in God.

Franklin Graham  
President and CEO  
Samaritan’s Purse  
Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

# Introduction

## **A HEART FOR THE HURTING**

*He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds.*

PSALM 147:3

LIKE YOU, I was overwhelmed by the images on my television screen of decimated villages and despairing people in Japan in the spring of 2011. Most of you vividly remember the horrifying news and the staggering before-and-after pictures in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami that hit the island nation on March 11, 2011. Entire villages disappeared. Boats, trains, and airplanes were tossed about like toys in the rush of ocean water. Weeping people searched for family and friends, even as they settled into shelters and tried to figure out where they would go next, since home was now—literally and completely—washed away.

Four months after the tragedy, the death toll in Japan had reached 15,605, with nearly 5,000 known people still missing, and at the time of this writing, there is still concern about crippled nuclear power plants. The number of the dead may never be completely known. Missing people were probably dragged out to sea. It is heartbreaking.

In 2006, when I decided to write the original version

of this book titled *Where Was God?*, I had been watching news coverage of another disaster—a CNN special report on children who survived the deadly earthquake in India and Pakistan on October 8, 2005. My heart ached as I watched volunteers helping the frightened youngsters. Those children—most of them newly orphaned—were bandaged and bruised. Some had eyes swollen shut, while others sat silently, their vacant faces revealing the shock they had experienced. Volunteers were doing what they could to provide comfort and basic necessities to the survivors. But many people trapped in remote villages had no help whatsoever. Eighty thousand people died in that 2005 quake.

Sadly, such disasters are not all that unusual. The October 2005 earthquake in India and Pakistan hit less than a year after one of the largest natural disasters in modern history, the tsunami that swept through Sri Lanka, Thailand, India, and a number of other countries in December 2004. The death toll following that disaster was almost 230,000 people. Think of it! The average football stadium has about fifty thousand seats. We're talking about almost five football stadiums full of people! The number is almost unfathomable—and many of those people were lost within minutes of that massive tsunami crashing into the coastlines of the countries in its path. A year after the tsunami, two million people were still homeless and many of them had hardly even begun to put their lives back together. Who can measure the number of tears wept because of disasters like this?

Those of us who live in the United States vividly remember Hurricane Katrina, which washed away much of the Gulf

Coast in August 2005 and nearly destroyed the city of New Orleans. Pictures of the thousands of people gathering aimlessly around the Louisiana Superdome—set up as a temporary shelter for about twenty thousand survivors—are etched in our minds. Every survivor has his or her own horrifying story to tell: A mother screamed out to her child as he was swept away in the rising waters. A family huddled in their attic and waved frantically for rescuers. In all, more than a thousand people died, and hundreds of thousands were left behind to try to regain some kind of normalcy.

I cannot help but ask myself, *What kind of a God allows such disasters to happen?*

And they happen over and over. 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 kill and destroy every day, though only the large-scale events make the news. In late April 2011, tornadoes ravaged the southern part of the United States, taking out entire cities—killing men, women, and children. And a month later, Joplin, Missouri, took a direct hit from a multiple-vortex EF5 tornado that claimed 160 lives, making it the country's deadliest single tornado in more than six decades.

I believe God is real, and I love and trust my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But the question still plagues me, as I'm sure it does you if you have picked up this book: what kind of God allows such disasters to happen?

## Dealing with the Big Questions

Some people think we should not even ask the question about what natural disasters say about God, that the question itself is too big, for it focuses on trying to explain a “natural” event in spiritual terms. They believe that these disasters are of such gigantic proportions that there could not possibly be any hidden meaning in them, nor can anything positive or helpful be said about them.

I believe that we *must* ask the big questions—but I’m warning you now that there are no easy answers. In addition, I am well aware that little 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 reassured with the words that God really does care and that He did this for some better end.

Such glib statements are not helpful and are, in fact, hurtful. Sometimes we just need to sit beside those who grieve, letting them know we care. In those moments of shock and grief, our silence along with our caring presence is far more soothing than us chattering 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. Some suffering is so big and so deep that it seems impossible to believe that there is any kind of reason for it, that any kind of good can

come from it, that any kind of loving God is behind it. In the end, it's better to simply give no answer than to give an inadequate or trivial one.

I'd like you to keep in mind as you read this book that although I use the term *natural evil*, I am making a distinction between natural disasters (things that happen in creation—what I've been talking about so far) and the evil things people do to each other, which can be traced back to choices people make (such as murder, injustice, war, stealing, etc.). Both types of evil are tragedies, of course, but for the purposes of this book, I want to look at natural evil, natural disasters.

In addition, it's important to remember that we only see something as a “disaster,” as “evil,” when it hurts us or our fellow human beings. A tsunami in the middle of an ocean that never reaches land or hurts anyone is not considered to be evil. We call it evil only when we see the devastation it brings and the people it hurts. It becomes evil because we regard suffering and death as evil.

So, “what kind of a God allows such disasters to happen?” We wonder how horrific disasters 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 remain intact?

Centuries ago, Asaph, who wrote many of the psalms in the Bible, found his faith slipping when he saw wicked people prosper over godly people. He begins with an optimistic statement and then reveals his doubts:

Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure. But as for me, I almost lost my footing. My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone. For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness.

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. If God does not exist, we can't call anything evil—not the disasters occurring in nature or the criminal acts of human beings. In an impersonal, atheistic world, whatever is, just *is*. No moral judgments are possible. I'll return to this point in chapter 4.

Ultimately, it comes around to a question of faith. Those who know God believe He has a justifiable reason for human tragedy; others treat such faith with contempt.

### **My Goals for This Book**

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 or cause them to worship Him with even more focus and awe. My goal is to provide assurance that the God of the Bible can be trusted. His promises to those who believe are worthy of our faith and form the basis of our hope.

We'll be answering questions such as:

- Should natural disasters be called acts 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 in God?

It comes down to this: in light of the suffering that seems so unnecessary in this world, can we still confidently trust in God? Should we even trust a God who allows disasters that He could keep from happening?

My intention is not to pry into God's diary and pretend that I can see and understand all of His purposes; indeed,

there are plenty of His purposes in these disasters that we will never know. Ultimately, only God knows why He allows disasters to occur. Rather, I want to show that *natural evil is not incompatible with the existence of a good and caring God who is in control of our world*. Together we'll encounter much mystery but, hopefully, also much insight that will guide us even as we grieve over the sorrow and suffering in our world.

Second, I want to warn against the well-intentioned but foolish interpretations that are frequently offered when disasters come. People of all faiths, including Christians, are often far too ready to read into disastrous events whatever they want to see. We must *caution against the comments of sincere people who are quite convinced that they alone have an understanding of God's mind in these matters*. 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*. It is true that the best explanations do not immediately help those who are struggling with grief. Those who believe in the God of the Bible, however, can discover a source of strength and comfort even when answers are hard to come by.

The first part of this book (chapters 1–4) deals largely with the theological and philosophical questions about natural evil. In the second part (chapters 5–6), I write as a pastor concerned for hurting people. I'll urge you 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.”

As I mentioned above, 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. 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, a nineteenth-century English poet, 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’s find out.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you or a loved one ever suffered a loss due to a natural disaster? Describe what happened and how you felt.

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2. In the aftermath of a natural disaster, do you tend to question God's goodness, or do you turn to Him for comfort? Why do you respond as you do?
3. How is *natural evil* different from *evil*?
4. What passages in the Bible come to mind when thinking of the struggle to believe in God's goodness in difficult times?

## DARE WE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS?

*Everything comes from God and exists by his power  
and is intended for his glory.*

ROMANS 11:36

“No, GOD! No, God! No, God!”

Those were the words of a man who apparently thought God had *something* to do with Hurricane Katrina that hit the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005. He was one of many who prayed as he climbed into his attic to wait out the storm and the high waters. Many people who had not prayed in years (if ever) called out to God when that tragedy struck.

Fast-forward six years and listen to this report from the Associated Press on Friday, March 11, 2011, after the off-shore earthquake and resultant tsunami that rocked Japan:

For more than two terrifying, seemingly endless minutes Friday, the most powerful earthquake ever

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recorded in Japan shook apart homes and buildings, cracked open highways and unnerved even those who have learned to live with swaying skyscrapers. Then came a devastating tsunami that slammed into northeastern Japan and killed hundreds of people.

The violent wall of water swept away houses, cars and ships. Fires burned out of control. Power to a cooling system at a nuclear power plant was knocked out, forcing thousands to flee. A boat was caught in the vortex of a whirlpool at sea.

The death toll rose steadily throughout the day, but the true extent of the disaster was not known because roads to the worst-hit areas were washed away or blocked by debris and airports were closed. . . .

Large fishing boats and other vessels rode the high waves ashore, slamming against overpasses or scraping under them and snapping power lines along the way. A fleet of partially submerged cars bobbed in the water. Ships anchored in ports crashed against each other.

The tsunami roared over embankments, washing anything in its path inland before reversing direction and carrying the cars, homes and other debris out to sea.<sup>1</sup>

A marketing employee in Tokyo is quoted in the same article as saying, "I thought I was going to die."

Or think of the tornadoes that hit the southern part of

the United States during the last week of April 2011, leaving over 340 people dead across seven states, with over 250 of those deaths in Alabama alone. This tornado storm system was the deadliest since March 18, 1925, when 747 people died. An eighty-two-year-old man in Alabama said, “I give God credit” for surviving the storm, but he is struggling as he attempts to recover belongings from his destroyed home.<sup>2</sup>

Across many of those same states, severe tornadoes had already destroyed lives back in May 1999. Stories abounded: a two-year-old child ripped from his father’s hands, thrown dozens of feet into the air before being slammed against the ground as a tornado tore through his family’s home; thousands of homeless families sifting through rubble. In one instance, a huge funnel cloud skipped across the ground for four hours, killing at least forty-three people and destroying more than fifteen hundred homes and hundreds of businesses. That 1999 storm was classified EF5, the most powerful tornado there is, with winds of more than 250 miles per hour.<sup>3</sup> Twelve years later, another EF5 tornado decimated Joplin, Missouri, taking 160 lives.

Or consider the tsunami that hit Indonesia the day after Christmas in 2004, killing hundreds of thousands of people and inflicting terrible suffering. An earthquake in the middle of the Indian Ocean set a massive wave hurtling across the surface until it smashed into the coastline full of unsuspecting people.

Or what about earthquakes? In Haiti, a year after the earthquake that decimated the country in January 2010, there were still more than a million people living in tent

cities. World Vision was working in Haiti before the earthquake, but in the aftermath, providing shelter has been the priority of the organization, a basic but critical step toward “rebuilding an entire country.”<sup>4</sup>

How about tidal waves? Different from tsunamis, which are caused by an earthquake under the sea, tidal waves happen when the moon’s gravity creates bulges on the ocean surface and the waves head to shore. When a thirty-foot tidal wave hit Papua New Guinea in 1998, it killed seven thousand people, wiping out nearly an entire generation of children.

And then there are mudslides. Catastrophic mudslides in Venezuela in December 1999 killed an estimated twenty thousand people in just a few days.

It seems that almost every day a disaster hits somewhere on our planet, with 2011 seeing the United States in the crosshairs of disasters. A record ten US weather catastrophes—blizzards, tornadoes, floods, drought, and Hurricane Irene—carried price tags of \$1 billion or more each, breaking the record of nine set in 2008. Globally, with Japan’s and New Zealand’s earthquakes and flooding in Australia, the total was estimated at \$265 billion in the first six months of 2011.<sup>5</sup>

So we ask a fair question: where was God?

It’s a great mystery, isn’t it? Why is God seemingly so silent in the presence of the human suffering we see all around us? Why doesn’t He speak? Why doesn’t He explain Himself? Doesn’t He understand the bad press He gets from natural disasters and the human suffering they cause?

God’s silence forces those of us who believe in Him to rethink our faith, cope with our doubts, and debate whether

He can be trusted. And if we can survive all that, we're still left with the responsibility of trying to explain that trust to our friends who themselves are dealing with questions. Just as earthquakes create aftershocks, natural disasters create religious aftershocks. Believers wrestle with doubts; unbelievers use disasters as justification for their refusal to believe in a loving God.

Either way, disasters force us to ask ultimate questions—yet we don't know what we'll find out. We wonder if we should even dare to search for answers.

### **The Earthquake That Shook Europe**

We begin our discussion not with recent disasters, but rather with 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 earthquakes and resultant tsunamis that occurred in 2004 in Sri Lanka and in 2011 in Japan. Other disasters might have caused worse damage and more deaths, but this particular disaster in the time frame it occurred had profound ramifications on people's thinking about God.

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 worshipers. One would think that the people who sought shelter in a house of God might be spared. Indeed, some people even ran into the churches in the middle of 9:30 morning mass. Eyewitnesses said that people looked terrified in the chaos after the first quake.

Then a second great quake hit, and priests and parishioners inside the churches were screaming and calling out to God for mercy. But heaven didn't seem to respond to their pleas. Almost all of the churches in Lisbon were reduced to rubble, and the people hiding in them were killed.

After the initial quake, which lasted from six to ten seconds, aftershocks continued to destroy buildings and homes. Fires 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 had sought shelter from the earthquake along the coast. The bright morning sky was darkened with soot and dust. With earth, fire, and water combining to magnify the destruction, even cool-headed observers suspected that something—or Someone—was behind it.<sup>6</sup> The earthquake claimed somewhere between thirty and sixty thousand lives and reduced three-quarters of the city to rubble.

Survivors were forced to rethink many of the important issues of human existence—the ultimate questions about the purpose of life, the reason for suffering, and the place of a loving God in the middle of such devastation. News of the horror in Lisbon spread throughout Europe, and everywhere there seemed to be a whole new willingness to consider and discuss questions about life beyond the grave. Many people began to talk about building a civilization based on Christianity, reasoning that the only real hope in this life must be rooted in the next. Then, as now, people were faced with one of two choices: (1) turn against God,

believing that He has no power or simply doesn't care about the plight of human beings, or (2) turn to God, believing that He has the power and plan to bring good out of 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 and that they could die in an instant. 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.<sup>7</sup>

Opinions were far from unanimous as to how the event should have been interpreted. People attempted to read God's mind and, not surprisingly, came up with a variety of reasons for why the disaster had occurred.

### **The Danger of Trying to Interpret a Disaster**

The people of Lisbon searched for meaning amid the rubble of destroyed homes and cartloads of dead bodies. Many believed the earthquake was an act of divine judgment against a sinful seaport city. A famous Jesuit (a Roman Catholic order of priests) 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."<sup>8</sup> After all, because the quake happened on All Saints' Day, many people assumed God was saying that the sins of even His followers were so grievous that they deserved immediate judgment.

What puzzled some people, however, was that a street filled with brothels was left largely undamaged.

Against the claims of the Jesuits, the Protestants said that the earthquake was a judgment against the Jesuits who founded the city. At that time, the Inquisition was in full force, and tens of thousands of so-called heretics were being brutally murdered. Like the famous Spanish Inquisition, the Inquisition in Portugal was focused on rooting out people who had converted to Catholicism from other religions but were not adhering to the fundamental beliefs of the Catholic faith. Many such people were branded as heretics and subsequently tortured and executed.

The Jesuits responded by saying that even though over a thousand people had been determined to be heretics and were burned at the stake, the quake revealed the anger of God because the Inquisition had not done enough to root out and punish heresy.

Clearly, people were confused.

A Franciscan priest (the Franciscans are another religious order within the Roman Catholic Church) gave a different interpretation, 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, the priest 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 people who survived could repent.<sup>9</sup>

Those who already believed in God accepted the general

consensus that the Lisbon tragedy had to be interpreted in light of an existence beyond earthly, human existence. They felt that God was somehow trying to communicate that there is a world beyond this one, a world that could give meaning to people's unpredictable and haphazard existence on earth. Sermons with interpretations on the lessons of the earthquake were preached for many years after.

Whenever tragedy strikes, we each have a tendency to interpret it in light of what *we* believe God is trying to say

(or what we *want* Him to say). In 2004, some Muslims believed that Allah struck Southeast Asia with a tsunami at Christmastime because the season is so filled with immorality, sin, alcohol, and other

*Whenever tragedy strikes, we each have a tendency to interpret it in light of what we believe God is trying to say (or what we want Him to say).*

excesses. And following Katrina, some Muslims said that Allah was heaping vengeance on the United States for the war in Iraq.

People are still as confused about the reason for disasters today as they were after the quake that rocked Lisbon over two hundred years ago. We see in natural disasters exactly what we 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 that reflects our own convictions and wishes.

All of this is a warning that we must be careful about what we say about 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. I believe that God does speak through these events, but we must be cautious about thinking we know the details of His agenda. We will discuss this concept further in chapter 3.

### **Is This “The Best of All Possible Worlds”?**

A German philosopher named Gottfried Leibniz, who lived a few decades before the Lisbon quake, was the first philosopher I know of to write a *theodicy*, a defense of God and His ways in the world. Leibniz taught that God had before Him an infinite number of possible worlds, but because God is good, He chose *this* world, planet Earth, which is “the best of all possible worlds.” God ordered nature to serve the best of all possible ends. After all, a good God would do only what is both best and right.

Needless to say, after the Lisbon earthquake, people had to ask whether this was indeed “the best of all possible worlds” and whether the laws of nature were indeed ordained for the best possible ends. If God had an infinite number of worlds and chose ours as the “best,” then what would the *worst* of all possible worlds look like!

Likewise, as we look around at the recent disasters that have rocked our planet, we must pause and ask, “Is this really the best of all possible worlds?” We instinctively know that it isn't—it can't be. Paradise will be the best of all possible worlds, not our current world with its suffering, corruption, and endless tragedy. No one could reasonably say this

is the best of all possible worlds. If it were, then it would be “best,” with no room for improvement. That is clearly not the case, and the writer of the book of Hebrews in the Bible agrees with us. The word *better* is used eleven times, and in Hebrews 11 it says that the biblical heroes longed for “a better place, a heavenly homeland” (v. 16) and that God has planned something better for His people (v. 40). Thus we work hard to make things “better” on this planet because we know this is not the best the world can be. Even in the case of natural disasters, while we are powerless to stop them from happening, we do our best to create warning systems and to minimize death and devastation. And when disasters *do* occur, people from all over the world descend upon the hard-hit areas to search for, rescue, and help suffering people. We do whatever we can to try to make it “better.”

### **The Christian Hope**

But that still doesn't help us with our core question about God's role in all of this. If this world *isn't* the best it can be, why isn't it? The Bible teaches that God created all things for His own pleasure and for His own glory: “For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory” (Romans 11:36). And we read that God “makes everything work out according to his plan” (Ephesians 1:11). If all things work to the glory of God and according to His plan, if indeed the details of history—along with natural and even human evil—all contribute to His eternal purpose, wouldn't it be accurate to say that even if this *isn't* the best of all possible worlds, it is being run by a God whose plan *is*

the best, if only we could see it from His point of view? Does He see our tragedies through a different lens? Might there be a good and wise reason for what we see as complete chaos?

As Christians, we believe that God is able to use tragedies for the best of all possible purposes and goals. He has not allowed His creation to spin out of control; He has a reason for human pain and suffering. So, although we have to look at 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.

Instead of looking at life from the viewpoint of a loving God who sees the end from the beginning, many believe that we are merely insects living for what amounts to a few seconds on an impersonal planet. We can never hope to understand the plans of an infinite Creator. And in some ways, they are right—but only if we reject the Bible, as they do. If we refuse to believe the Bible, we are left without promises and without hope. If we have no Word from the Creator, the world of nature is indeed a brutal and impersonal force that can reveal no hidden messages and have no ultimate reason. Left to ourselves, we could never figure out the meaning of our existence, much less the purpose in our pain.

### **The Reality of the Curse**

But when we turn to the Bible, we are offered insight. No, 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 to nor unaware of what has gone wrong with nature. It is important for us to understand that there is a vast difference between the world God originally created and the one that now erupts with earthquakes, hurricanes, mudslides, tornadoes, and floods. Something is no longer right, and our world awaits the time when God will make it right. We are living on a once perfect but now flawed planet. Sin changed everything.

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

Here is the way the apostle Paul explains it in the book of Romans:

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

ROMANS 8:18-22

Paul began by saying that what we suffer now can't even begin to 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 human sinfulness. 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: "Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse." 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 (what occurs outside of human control—what we call "natural disasters") is merely a reflection of moral evil (what occurs when human beings choose to do evil). Both are savage, ruthless, and damaging. Both can result in devastation. Yet 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. The same is true for people. We human beings are not as evil as we could be; 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 see the devastating results of the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan, we should see more than creation gone amok—we should also 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 to humanity, showing 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 all of humankind await a liberation that only God can bring about.

So we work hard to make this world a better place, even as we look “forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay,” as Paul wrote. We rush to the scene of a devastating earthquake in order to do what we can to help those in desperate need. We 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. We fight disease, create early warning systems for tornadoes, build strong foundations on our buildings, and dig trenches and burn areas of brush in order to stop a raging forest fire in its tracks. We cooperate with nature when we can, and we subdue it for our benefit. In the same way, we also fight against sin in our own lives, within our nation, and within the world. We fight against the Curse wherever it is found.

Creation “is waiting eagerly” for its deliverance. The Greek word used in Romans 8:19 fittingly describes the attitude of a man who scans the horizon on a dark night searching for the first glimpse of the dawn.<sup>10</sup> Nature is pictured as if on tiptoes, waiting for its own release from the Curse. God will not allow redeemed people to live in an unredeemed environment and vice versa—that is, we as humans have not yet been made perfect, so as imperfect people we could not live in a perfect environment. When God’s people are fully and finally redeemed, nature will follow suit. Better days lie ahead.

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.

### **Natural Disasters Show What We Really Believe**

The Lisbon earthquake split Europe between earth and heaven.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, the tragedy stimulated interest in religion, especially the Christian faith. Church attendance increased, and people were more likely to be thinking about

where they would spend eternity. They became more loyal to the church and to God.

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

At the same time, however, the quake and the resulting ultimate questions spurred the development of naturalism and the growth of

the secular Enlightenment or “age of reason”—terms used to describe a time period in Western Europe when a strong belief in rational thinking and science superseded religious belief.

The great philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote a book about the Lisbon 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 regarding the cause of the quake. God only needed to be brought into a discussion when things could not be explained. It was quite unnecessary to bring Him up once it was determined that a disaster occurred because nature was behaving according to various natural laws. Unfortunately,

taking God out of the discussion often raises more questions as people wonder if God has any power over His creation or any care for His people.

The Lisbon quake forced people to make a decision: the heavenly minded were motivated to become more devoted to their religious commitments; the earthly minded were more inclined to explain 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 in faith and trust 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 still 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. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told a story about a natural disaster that exposed the inner lives of two neighbors:

Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.

MATTHEW 7:24-27

On a beautiful, sunny afternoon, these two houses looked identical. Only the powerful wind revealed the difference between the two of them. 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 that ultimately leave us hopeless.

To those who say God is merely an idea, a last resort in times of difficulty, natural disasters are only a further reason

*Natural disasters still have a way of getting to the bottom of our values and character, of revealing our secret loves and personal convictions.*

to *not* believe in Him and His care. But for those who have tested God by His Word and His promises, the onslaught of past disasters as well as those that are yet to come will not destroy their faith.

### **Proceed with Caution**

This brief introduction to natural disasters serves two purposes: First, when we hear about or experience natural disasters, we must not immediately read into the events our own specific view of what God is doing. As I've said, people will always give disasters an interpretation compatible with their religion, their understanding of sin, and their own convictions of what they think God should do. But let's also not do the opposite and speak as if the Bible is silent about these matters. Let's avoid both extremes.

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 earth. And as I shall explain later, the worst natural disasters still lie ahead.

You see, if natural disasters do not serve God's good ends, then we are confronted with a God who is either 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 purposes. But there is also a danger in being silent, in 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.

In the next chapter, we'll 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 the Curse on 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 His plan in natural disasters? Why or why not?

## AN ACT OF GOD?

2. In what ways do you think natural disasters mirror the evil side of human nature?
3. How do natural disasters reveal our true values and character, exposing our inner lives?
4. Philosopher Immanuel Kant said that if natural disasters can be explained by natural laws, it is unnecessary to bring God into the discussion. Do you agree or disagree?
5. The frequency of natural disasters has increased significantly in the last century. In your opinion, what factors are contributing to that increase?

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