

DISASTER

a christian response

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Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation.

What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten.

The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree—all the trees of the field—are dried up.

Surely the joy of mankind is withered away. Joel 1:2-4, 12

The world regularly experiences mind-numbing disasters. Like the locust plague of Joel's day, hurricanes, volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, vast fires and floods, plagues, droughts, floods and other ecological calamities happen all the time, withering away the joy of mankind.

Until recently, we have only been impacted by these horrors when they strike close to home, falling upon us or those we love. Sophisticated communication is changing all that, however. Now it is possible to watch and listen to the mortal agony of thousands as it happens anywhere in the world. Through television, we fly over destruction on a scale we can barely absorb. News reports place us alongside human beings just like us as they try to grasp the enormity of their loss. We wonder if the individuals speaking to us on TV will be alive tomorrow, whether they will find missing family members ... how will they go on?

What are we to do with all this exposure? We must come to grips with our own personal responsibility for the welfare of our neighbor. We must deal with our own feelings. And most importantly, we have to integrate such intense human pain with our understanding of God.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” “... And who is my neighbor?”
Luke 10:27,29

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus taught us to not worry about choosing which neighbors to help, but concentrate instead on being a neighbor to those who need aid. Modern communication greatly expands our circle of “neighbors.” Nevertheless, in every catastrophe, it is not a question of whether Christians should help—it is simply a question of how.

That how will work itself out in each circumstance, depending on our opportunities and resources. The important thing is to consciously accept personal responsibility to help hurting people who come across our path.

Accepting our responsibilities is difficult for two reasons. The first is a simple desire to avoid inconvenience. Every one of us knows the temptation to look the other way, like the religious figures in Jesus’ story. Combating that temptation is a matter of spiritual growth, honesty and maturity.

The other reason is quite different: we can’t believe we can make much a difference. Needs are so huge, and so frequent. But remember, God does not call us to solve the world’s problems. He does, however, want us to work alongside Him to give help in each case of great need, and try to make this broken world work a little better.

Many of us have to learn to take more responsibility than we are accustomed to taking. This is all the more important for those of us who are parents, because we have to teach our children how to assume responsibility, too. We cannot expect them to be intelligently compassionate unless we show them how. In practical terms, this may mean that several generations must learn new habits together.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

First, we need to discuss major crises. We need to inform ourselves, talk about them as adults and weigh them with our children. Some crises will be plastered on the TV, and others will require a little more effort to research on the internet. Look at the pictures, listen to the stories. Read articles. Discuss the appropriate responsibilities of governments and individuals. If we do this each time there is a catastrophe, then dealing with major crises will eventually become a normal part of our lives. Let our children learn that they live in a world of hurt, and it is part of Christian faith to continually respond to this hurt.

What can you do personally to help? Two obvious things come to mind.

The first thing we can do is to pray. Prayer for specific hurting people can easily become a regular part of our daily or weekly routine. TV and internet can easily give us information to enable simple, intelligent prayers.

- Ask God for His mercy upon all those suffering. Think through what you would need if you were in their shoes, and ask the Lord to provide for them. Ask that God would help those in distress to humble themselves before Him, that He might lift them up.
- Ask God to strengthen those on the scene offering direct aid. Ask Him to bless these helpers for doing the right thing, and to especially bless those who help in His name.
- Ask for His special grace and comfort to fellow Christian brothers and sisters who are suffering. Think of them as family.
- Ask God for mercy upon those who will die today, and to bring to their minds every true thing they ever heard about Christ.

- Ask God to raise up pastors, churches and other spiritual resources to help those afflicted.
- Ask God to raise up practical aid from many people, including us.
- Ask God for opportunities for you to help, and expect Him to answer.

The other obvious thing we can do is give money. Do not assume that because you may not have much cash to give, that it isn't worth the trouble. Try to give something, even if it just a little. Let the whole family get involved, contributing from allowances and making decisions together about priorities that affect the whole family. This process not only develops responsible compassion, it also teaches the value of money and equips the family to be the primary source of charity.

This process will be much easier if you carve out a budget category for compassionate giving, or alms (over and above budgeted tithing). Putting some money aside from each paycheck for compassionate giving will put resources in hand when we want to help.

It will also be easier if you have already selected a list of organizations you trust, so you can give easily, responsibly and quickly.

Beyond regular prayer and giving from regular savings, discuss other creative ideas for helping. Adopting a family project will not only do wonderful good, it will also create some of the most meaningful memories your family will ever have. Does the church sponsor a special project? Do you have a friend who is directly involved? Simply talking about the issue as a family will reveal possibilities.

This is a great time to bask in the wonderful, amazing truth that "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35) A consumer-oriented society finds this truth difficult to grasp, but that does not make it any less true. It's good to be blessed! And we are most blessed by being a blessing to others.

In the aftermath of major crises, discuss probable causes and think about what civilized societies might do to either prevent or alleviate such tragedies. Talk about what citizens can do to encourage appropriate change in government. Add such concerns to your list of issues to consider when voting. Perhaps someone in the family could prepare an expression of encouragement to people who have worked sacrificially for others.

OUR FEELINGS

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Matthew 5:4

As challenging as prayer and practical contributions may seem, it can be an even greater challenge to know how to respond emotionally to the devastation we witness in the media. It is torturous to watch fellow human beings in serious distress, and not be able to directly “jump in” and help. We are wired to reach out and give a hand to a person in mortal need. But while we can see such people on the TV screen as if they were in the room with us, we cannot just reach out and help them.

We have to keep our heart tender, but it is hard for a tender heart to endure such pain. News coverage may go on 24 hours a day, but we may find it necessary to limit our intake of disaster scenes. Not that we should shield ourselves or our older children from horrific, but real, images of life. But unlimited exposure of a specific disaster is not healthy. The truth is that similar suffering is going on somewhere all the time. News coverage will avoid most disasters in the world, and obsess over a few of national interest. A balanced life deals with suffering every day—from local fires to floods on the other side of the planet—without allowing our spirits to be dominated by it all.

Emotionally, that means faithfully responding with compassion every day in ways that will not exhaust our compassion tomorrow. It

means being grateful every day for our many blessings, and consciously living in joyful hope. The challenge is to lead a life dominated by hope, peace and joy, while finding a permanent place in our emotions for the excruciating suffering of others.

One skill that can help us live this way is the ability to mourn. In our society, we tend to avoid dealing with difficult or sad truths. This makes us emotionally vulnerable to terror, anger, bitterness and depression when faced with human suffering. We would be less vulnerable to these things and emotionally healthier if we relearned how to mourn.

Mourning is a clear recognition that the world is desperately broken. It is a willingness to live in the real world described by Scripture, rather than the make-believe world we would like. Mourning keeps sin from becoming a churchy abstraction; it reminds us of the world's desperate condition and keeps us from taking our many, many blessings for granted.

Mourning is a humble sadness willing to admit that we do not control the world. God has given us dominion over the earth and many tools with which to administer that dominion, but our control is limited. Humble recognition of our limitations is not something the human race is good at. We prefer to focus on what we can accomplish, and what we need to do to fix things. That is excellent. But we need to practice mourning, too. While there is so much we can do to help, there are many tragedies we cannot fix.

Mourning is pure sadness over loss. Mourning humbly recognizes the special dignity of human beings. It also recognizes the dignity of animals and the harmony of creation. Mourning humbly offers respect to God for that part of His creation which is in agony. Sometimes that agony is worsened by human oppression, pettiness and stupidity, so there is a place for righteous anger, too. But mourning is not about anger; it is a personal offering to God of respect, recognizing the sadness of what we see.

Mourning is quiet, dignified recognition of pain and loss. Mourning may call for tears. It is OK for our children to cry with us. The more often we mourn the pain of others, the less devastating and fearful such pain will be. We can integrate it into a healthy cycle that moves us on to help, rejoice in our blessings, and worship God.

Godly mourning is not despair. It does not believe the world is out of control. Mourning recognizes that the world is out of our control, and it hurts to see it.

Jesus promised that those who mourn in a godly way can expect to be comforted. Every time you allow yourself the freedom to mourn, you will find that to be true. Let the pain of mourning bring us and our families back to the gospel over and over again. The gospel is not just something we get to focus on in happy church services. It can thrill the soul, bring comfort and hopeful enthusiasm in the worst of circumstances.

OUR GOD

“Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Genesis 18:25

How does our understanding of God fit into natural disasters? To biblical authors, the wrath of God did not in itself pose a rational problem. How else should a just and holy God react to the worst forms of human sin? When you look at what the darkest side of our nature is capable of, radical discipline or punishment seems only right and proper.

The problem comes with wondering whether wholesale disasters are fair. In Genesis 18, Abraham was concerned that in the impending judgment of Sodom, righteous people would suffer along with the most wicked.

Reading the story reminds us that truly righteous people are harder to come by than we might think.

Nevertheless, we face the same concerns in every age. It's always possible to guess why God might bring a hurricane or famine on a particular people. There are always lots of human faults to point a finger at. "Maybe God is punishing them for their immorality, or for the way their great-grandparents conducted a war, or for their corrupt politics, or ..." ... the list goes on. But then you look at the magnitude of the suffering—often involving little children—and you realize that such explanations just can't be right.

Most people are confused and angry about serious suffering because they can't understand how God can allow it. Do people deserve to suffer so?

The question is not simple because the answer is both "Yes" and "No."

On the yes side, it is clear that none of us has a good grasp on the sinfulness of sin, and what sinners like us justly deserve. Romans 1:18 declares that by nature we suppress the truth about the sinfulness of our own sin. We tend to surround ourselves with relationships, cultures and religions which excuse or justify the kind of people we intend to be. Not that each subgroup feels that other groups are OK, but we all feel that we are basically OK. We confess to small faults, of course, but we do so (as Mark Twain observed) to convey the impression that we have no large ones.

How can we get in touch with our own sinfulness and what it deserves, when we work so hard to avoid facing the truth?

One thing we can do is observe the worst behavior brought out by these disasters—looting, price gouging, bureaucratic corruption, callousness—and remember that such behavior reflects the inner brokenness of our fallen humanity. Thank God that our upbringing has submerged some of this behavior in us, but just look at what rumbles underneath our civilized veneer.

Another thing we can do is to let major disasters expose the inequities and injustices of our world. Thank God for the amazing

lifestyle most of us enjoy. But consider the layer upon layer of sin that separates, segments and oppresses so many people for the benefit of a few. We are not responsible for creating such a state of affairs, but we are part of it. How does God feel about the world we have made?

Yet another way to appreciate the scope and seriousness of human sin is to let the disasters we are trying to deal with show us, as living object lessons. Instead of coming away from these disasters wondering about God's justice, try coming to them assuming that He is just. Assume that human sin really does justify eternal Hell, and let the smaller hells of human devastation paint a picture of the sinfulness of sin. Look at thousands of burned out acres. Look at the impact of tsunamis and hurricanes. Look at the aftermath of a flood, volcano or earthquake. Look at refugees suffering from pestilence and famine. These are not examples of God's judgment, but they are excellent pictures of what God's judgment against our sin would look like.

That is how Jesus instructed us to understand these events when He was asked about a couple of local catastrophes in His day. While biblical prophets sometimes predicted disasters to underscore God's wrath, Jesus clarified that outside of that context, disasters should not be interpreted as special occasions of God's judgment, as if the people who suffer them are worse sinners than others. Instead, He told us to see in them the enormous impact of our sin and a picture of divine judgment to come. In His words, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:1-3). Huge devastations are not an outpouring of God's judgment, but God's judgment is coming. Disasters remind us of the spiritual state of this world, and give us a picture of the kind of wrath humanity is going to face.

On the no side, we learn from the statement of Jesus just quoted that people who endure natural disasters are not necessarily any worse sinners than anyone else. In that sense, temporal suffering is unfair. Part of the impact of human sin is that, in this world, people do not suffer its consequences equally. Sin has cut us off from God, and the

results are catastrophic: every kind of injury and disease, all sorts of folly, betrayal, oppression and criminal irresponsibility, and of course, death itself. But in this world, while we may all be perpetrators of sin, we are not all equally victims of sin. The world is not a fair place at all. Uneven and unfair concentrations of agony are some of the worst results of being cut off from God. Psalm 73 explores this frustrating fact superbly, finding solace in a vision of God's future judgment when divine retribution will finally deal out justice with utter fairness.

Do people deserve to suffer so? Yes and no. But in either case, the fault does not lie with God. The fault lies with the human sin which has cut His blessing down to a bare trickle. The point is not that specific instances of suffering are linked to specific human sins (that is never the case in major world catastrophes). The point is that the self-centered spiritual rebellion of which we all bear some responsibility has distanced the whole world from our Creator (Isaiah 59:1-2). Being cut off from God is a very bad place to be. It upsets the balance of nature and leaves us vulnerable to all manner of anguish. Christ came to save us from the guilt, and power and misery of our sin.

People get angry with God in the face of immense human suffering because they refuse to accept the sinfulness of human sin. They would rather pretend that humanity is innocent, even if it means attacking the goodness of God and giving up all eternal hope.

Christians are willing to accept the sinfulness of sin, affirming the goodness of God and embracing the hope of the gospel. In fact, we even see the shadow of God's goodness in the horrific images of people in agony. We realize that God can only put an end to the miseries of this age by ushering in the next age of judgment and glory. In other words, for God to put a stop to such pain would require the final judgment of the human race—eternal damnation for more people than we can imagine. The fact that unfair disasters still happen is a great reminder that God has not yet brought this age to a close. We

understand that our good God allows the devastating consequences of our sin to continue precisely because He still wishes to save many more people. And not only does He desire to save greater numbers of people, He also intends to do so in a way that makes it clear that He does not play national or racial favorites. Therefore, God is also waiting until every nation and people group are blessed with the gospel.

Until those goals are accomplished, the world must go on, with the church reaching out into all the world. Until that goal is accomplished, the world must go on as it is, in all its vulnerability to unjust, immense temporal suffering.

But take heart, for this age of the world will not last one second longer than necessary. When God's goals are complete, He will end the immense agonies of this age forever, and their like shall never be known again. And in the meantime, He delights to freely pour out compassion upon those who call upon Him, largely through the compassion of those who know Him. He will even go so far as to pardon any offense and adopt anyone as His child through simple faith in Jesus Christ.

How can we respond to overwhelming disaster? We must shoulder our responsibility to help. We must mourn for all that is lost. And we must understand the underlying cause of such pain, looking to God for hope during the worst of times, when the locusts come and the joy of mankind is withered away.



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