

Understanding Natural Disasters

What does the Bible say about hurricanes, tornadoes and other natural disasters? Does the Bible give an answer to why the world is in such a mess if God is really in control? How could a God of love let masses of people die from killer hurricanes, catastrophic earthquakes, tsunamis, terrorist attacks and disease? Why such bizarre carnage and chaos? Is the world coming to an end? Is God pouring out his wrath upon sinners? Why is it so often the bloated bodies of the poor, the elderly, and the children that are strewn among the rubble? These are the questions most people are begging to be answered.

IS GOD RESPONSIBLE FOR NATURAL DISASTERS?

Although God is often viewed as the One causing these terrible catastrophes, He is not responsible. God is not in the business of causing natural disasters and calamities. On the contrary, He is the giver of life. The Bible says, "for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner: but My salvation shall be for ever, and My righteousness shall not be abolished" (Isaiah 51:6). This text declares a dramatic difference between natural calamities and the work of God.

When God came to earth in the form of man He did nothing to hurt people, only to help them. Jesus said, "For the Son of Man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:56). He said, "Many good works have I shown you from My Father. For which of those works do ye stone Me?" (John 10:32). He says, ". . . it is not the will of your Father who is in Heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Matt. 18:14).

It was God's design that His sons and daughters should forever smell the fragrance of exotic flowers, not rotting corpses. They should always enjoy the delicacies of tropical fruit and tasty dishes, not face hunger and starvation. He is the one who provides the fresh air from a mountaintop and cool sparkling water, not ugly pollution.

WHY DOES NATURE SEEM TO BE BECOMING MORE AND MORE DESTRUCTIVE?

When Adam and Eve sinned it brought a natural consequence to the earth. "And unto Adam He [God] said, "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree of which I commanded thee, saying, `Thou shalt not eat of it,' cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life (Gen. 3:17). The descendants of Adam became so violent and corrupt that God allowed the world to be destroyed by a global flood (Genesis 6:5,11). The fountains of the deep were broken up (Genesis 7:11). There was great volcanic activity. The layers of the earth's crust were formed and nature was turned out of its God-given course. The stage was set for earthquakes, and killer storms. As the consequences of sin have progressed from that day to this, the natural world is nearing its end; the results of our first parents' disobedience is becoming more and more evident as this world is wearing out. But God is still in the business of rescuing, helping, and healing. He holds out salvation and everlasting life to all who will receive Him.

IF GOD DOES NOT BRING NATURAL DISASTERS, WHO DOES?

Many people do not believe in a real devil, but the Bible is very clear on this point. Satan exists, and he is the destroyer. Jesus said, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). Satan was once a holy angel at the right hand of God in heaven (Isaiah 14

and Ezekiel 28). He rebelled against God and was cast out of heaven. "So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him" (Revelation 12:9). Jesus said, "the devil was a murderer from the beginning, and the father of lies" (John 8:44). The Bible says that the devil attempts to deceive the whole world, and one way he tries to do this is by spreading the idea that there is no real devil. According to recent surveys, fewer and fewer people in America believe the devil really exists. The existence of a real devil is the only thing that can explain the existence of evil in a world that is predominantly good. "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (Revelation 12:12).

The Old Testament story of Job is a classic example of how God sometimes allows Satan to bring calamities. Job lost his cattle, his crops, and his family to vicious attacks, a killer hurricane, and firestorm. Job's friends said these disasters came from God, but a careful reading of the book of Job reveals that it was Satan who brought these evils (see Job 1:1-12).

WHY DOES GOD GIVE SATAN PERMISSION TO DESTROY?

Satan deceived Eve, and through her he led Adam to sin. Because he had tempted the first humans—the head of the human race—into sin, Satan claimed that they had chosen him as the god of this world (see 2 Corinthians 4:4). He claims to be the rightful ruler of this world (see Matthew 4:8, 9). Through the ages, Satan has been fighting against God, trying to establish his claim to this world. He points to all those who have chosen to follow him as proof that he is the rightful ruler of this world. The Bible says, "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slave whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?" (Romans 6:16, NKJV). God has given His Ten Commandments as eternal rules for living, for determining what is right and wrong. He offers to write these laws in our hearts and minds. Many, however, choose to neglect His offer of a new life and choose to live outside God's will. By so doing they support Satan's claim against God. The Bible says that this situation will only get worse as time goes on. In the last days, "evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:13). As men and women remove themselves from God's protection, they are subject to Satan's destroying hatred.

God is love, and His character is perfectly unselfish, and just. Therefore, His own character prevents Him from doing anything that is unfair. He will not interfere with man's free choice. Those who choose to follow Satan are free to do so. And God will allow Satan to demonstrate to the universe what the consequences of sin really are. In the calamities and disasters that befall the earth and destroy lives, we can see what sin is like, what life is like when Satan has his own way.

A rebellious teen may choose to leave home because he finds the rules too restricting. He may find a cruel world waiting to teach him the harsh realities of life. But the parents do not stop loving their rebellious son or daughter. They do not want them to be hurt, but they can do little to prevent it if the child is determined to go their own way. The parents hope and pray that the difficult realities of the world will bring their child home, much like the prodigal son in the Bible (see Luke 15:18). Speaking of those who choose to follow Satan, God

says, "I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured. And many evils and troubles shall befall them, so that they will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?' " (Deuteronomy 31:17). This is the message that we may learn from calamities and natural disasters. They can lead us to seek the Lord.

Why did God create the devil?

Actually, God did not create the devil. God created a beautiful, perfect angel named Lucifer (see Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28). Lucifer, in turn, made a devil out of himself. Lucifer's pride caused him to rebel against God and to challenge Him for supremacy. He was thrown out of heaven and came to this earth where he tempted a perfect man and woman to sin. When they did so, they opened a floodgate of evil upon the world.

Why does God not kill the devil?

Some have wondered, "Why doesn't God stop the devil? If it is not God's will for people to die, why does He allow it to happen? Have things gone beyond God's control?"

God could have destroyed Satan when he rebelled in heaven. God could have destroyed Adam and Eve when they sinned—and started over. However, if He had done this, He would have been ruling from the standpoint of force, rather than love. The angels in heaven and human beings on Earth would serve Him from fear, not love. In order for love to flourish, it must operate on the principle of freedom of choice. Without freedom to choose, there would be no such thing as real love. We would simply be robots. God chose to preserve our freedom of choice and to rule by love. He chose to allow Satan and sin to run their course. He would allow us and the universe to see where sin would lead. He would let us see the reasons for making the choice to serve Him in love.

Why is it so often the poor, the elderly, and the children who suffer the most?

Is it fair for the innocent to suffer? No, it's not fair. The point is that sin is not fair. God is fair, but sin is not fair. That is the nature of sin. When Adam sinned he gave himself and the human race into the hands of a destroyer. God allows Satan to become active in working through nature to bring about destruction as a consequence of man's choice. God does not want it to happen. He did not want Adam and Eve to sin. But he allowed it, because that was the only way human beings could have the gift of freedom of choice.

A son or daughter may rebel against good parents and go out into the world and live a life of sin. They may have children. They may abuse the children. This is not fair, yet it happens when people make wrong choices. A loving parent or grandparent would want to rescue abused children. And so does God. This is why Jesus came to this earth.

Does God send calamities to kill sinners?

Some mistakenly think that God always sends calamities to punish sinners. This is not true. Jesus commented on acts of violence and natural calamities that happened in His day. The Bible says, "There were present at that season some who told Him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, "Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, nay; but unless ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and slew them,

think ye that they were sinners above all other men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, nay; but unless ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:1-5).

These things happened because in a world of sin there are calamities and atrocities that take place that would not happen in a perfect world. It does not mean that everyone who dies in such calamities is a sinner nor does it mean that God causes the calamity. It is often the innocent that suffer the consequences of living in this world of sin.

But didn't God destroy wicked cities like Sodom and Gomorrah?

Yes. In past times, God has brought judgment upon the wicked as He did in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Bible says, "Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 7). The destruction of these wicked cities was an example of the judgments that will come upon the whole world at the end of time as a result of sin. In His mercy, God allowed His judgment to fall on Sodom and Gomorrah so that many others might be warned. This does not necessarily mean that when an earthquake or a tornado or a tsunami strikes that God is pouring out His wrath in judgment upon cities like New York, New Orleans, or Port-au-Prince. We live in a sinful world and disasters can strike at any time.

Some have suggested that natural disasters are perhaps the beginning of God's final judgments upon the wicked. One should not rule out the possibility that sinners are receiving the consequences of their rebellion against God, but we cannot correlate particular disasters with divine retribution against specific sinners or sins. These horrible events may well be simply the result of living in a world that has fallen so far from God's ideal. Even if these disasters might be considered early warnings of God's final judgment, none should conclude that all those who die in them are eternally lost. Jesus said that in the final judgment it would be more tolerable for some of those destroyed in Sodom, than for those who reject His invitation to salvation in cities that were not destroyed (see Luke 10:12-15).

What is the wrath of God that will be poured out in the last days?

The Bible explains God's wrath as allowing human beings to choose to separate themselves from God if they so desire. When the Bible speaks about God's wrath, it does not mean that God is vindictive or retaliatory. God is love, and He wants everyone to be saved. But He allows men and women to go their own way if they insist on doing so. The Bible says that destruction comes to the wicked, because "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

This tells us that God's wrath is the inevitable consequence that comes to those who choose to separate themselves from Him. God does not want to give up any of His children to destruction. He says, "How shall I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you as Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me; my sympathy is stirred" (Hosea 11:8). The Lord longs with all His heart to see everyone eternally saved. " 'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11).

Is God on vacation? Why does it seem like He stands by and lets all this happen?

Where is God when all this happens? Do not good people pray for safety? The Bible says, "Am I a God at hand, saith the LORD, and not a God afar off?" (Jeremiah 23:23). The Son of God did not remain aloof from suffering. He suffers with the innocent. He was the classic example of the suffering of the innocent. As a matter of fact, from the beginning, He has done only good. He accepted the consequence of our rebellion against Himself. He did not stay away. He came down to this world and suffered in our suffering. God himself experienced the most horrible pain imaginable upon the cross. He endured the pain of the hostility of a sinful human race. He took upon Himself the consequence of our sins.

When disasters happen, the real point is that they could happen to any of us at any time. It is only because God is love that one heartbeat follows another. He gives life and love to all. Every day, billions of people wake up to fresh air, warm sunshine, delicious food, and comfortable homes—because God is love, and He showers His blessings on the earth. We have no individual claim on life, however, as though we had created ourselves. We must acknowledge that we live in a world that is subject to death from a variety of sources. We need to remember, as Jesus said, that unless we repent we shall all likewise perish. Calamities serve to remind us of the fact that apart from the salvation that Jesus offers, there is no hope for the human race. We can expect more and more destruction as we come closer to the time of His return to earth. "Now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed" (Romans 13:11).

NO MORE PAIN

The calamities and catastrophes that engulf our world serve as reminders that this world of sin, pain, hate, fear, and tragedy will not last forever. Jesus has promised that He will return to Earth to save us from our world that is falling to pieces. God has promised to make everything new again and that sin will never rise up again (see Nahum 1:9). God will live with His people, and there will be an end to death, crying, and pain. "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'" (Revelation 21:3, 4).