

Acts of God – What’s natural about disasters?

When Lightning Strikes – Part IV

Selected Scripture

Introduction

The story I recently read began with these words:

The sound was deafening. Although no one was near enough to hear it, it ultimately echoed around the world. None of the passengers in the DC-4 ever knew what happened . . . they died instantly. It was February 15, 1947. The Avianca Airline flight bound for Quito, Ecuador, crashed clumsily into a 14,000 foot-high towering mountain peak near Bogotá . . . then dropped, a flaming mass of metal, into a ravine far below.

One of the passengers was Glenn Chambers. He planned to begin a ministry with the Voice of the Andes, a lifelong dream that suddenly ended . . . and for his remaining loved ones, his dream became their nightmare.

Before leaving the Miami airport earlier that day, Chambers had hurriedly dashed off a note to his mom on a piece of paper he found on the floor of the terminal. It was a scrap of paper that had once been an advertisement for something. On one side was his note; on the other side was a single word typed across the face of that scrap of paper – “*WHY*”.

Between the mailing and the delivery of that note, Glenn was killed. When the letter arrived, there, staring up at his mom, was that haunting word; that lamenting question, “Why?”ⁱ

Perhaps the two most often asked questions of life are:

- “Why did this happen?”

And its twin question:

- “Where was God when it did?”

Or perhaps it could be asked in this way:

- “Why did God let this happen in the first place?”

Had we been neighbors of Job and his wife, by the time the events of chapter 1 were over, we would have been asking the same questions. In fact, most of the rest of the book of Job is nothing less than an attempt by Job and his friends to answer these questions. If we did not know the rest of the story, we would be asking the same things today.

In one afternoon, Job’s dreams turned into nightmares. In our last session, we watched as Job reacted to four messengers:

1. In verses 14-15, the first messenger came and told Job that the Sabeans took his oxen and donkeys and killed his farm hands.
2. In verse 16, the second messenger came and interrupted the first messenger and told Job that fire had fallen from heaven and consumed his 7,000 sheep and killed all his herdsmen.
3. The second messenger was interrupted in verse 17, with the message that the Chaldeans raided Job’s import/export

business, stole all of his camels and killed all but one of his employees.

4. In verses 18-19, the fourth and final messenger came and delivered the most horrifying news of all when he said that a whirlwind had struck Job's oldest son's house and all ten of his children were now dead. There was only one survivor – this messenger who stood there gasping for breath and wiping tears from his eyes.

Job fell to the ground.

I reread this paragraph, and timed myself. Reading only the messages that came one after another – in fact, the text clearly indicates that these messengers arrived virtually at the same time and interrupted each other with each new message – it only took me thirty-nine seconds. Thirty-nine seconds for Job to have his heart broken and his world brought crashing down around him.

It takes a lifetime to build something, so why can so many things in life collapse in a matter of seconds?

The trouble Job will have for many months will not have anything to do with the Sabeans and the Chaldeans – they were thieves and brutal warriors. The trouble Job will have is with the other two events – the whirlwind that seemed to target the house of his oldest son and the fire that fell from heaven.

Insurance agents and mortgage companies would call these events “acts of God”. Were they? And is that enough of an answer?

- Is God involved in tragedies?
- Is God really interested in what happens on the planet He created?
- Is God powerful enough to control nature?
- Should natural disasters be called “acts of God”?

Haven't millions inside and outside the church wondered at times if God were indifferent or calloused or uncaring?

Does God care? Does He watch the news?

One newsman, commenting on Hurricane Katrina, spoke for many skeptics when he said: “If this world is the product of intelligent design, then the designer has some explaining to do.”

This kind of bold statement might make us cringe. I think it is interesting that the agnostics and atheists who do not believe in God assume the

existence of God as they rail against Him for allowing the disasters to occur.ⁱⁱ

The eastern world has an answer without a personal active God. They would say that anyone so affected is simply living out the Law of Karma. Hinduism's Law of Karma says that all the actions of life today are the result of the actions of a previous life. Blindness, poverty, hunger and the actions of others toward us are all the out workings of punishment for evil deeds in a previous existence. To attempt to alleviate pain and misery would be to interfere with justice.

This is one of the primary reasons that countries guided by Hinduism do little for the unfortunate among them. Poverty and disease are rampant. Why not, if it is the person's fault?

This is a neat, simple, clearly understood explanation for suffering.ⁱⁱⁱ

The truth is that no matter what we believe, we normally attempt to explain natural disasters and suffering in general.

In 2004, many Muslims believed that Allah had struck Southeast Asia with a tsunami at Christmastime because the season is so filled with immorality and alcohol.

Hurricane Katrina, which came in 2005, was the third strongest hurricane to reach landfall in American history. Nearly two thousand people died in the storm. It has become the costliest natural disaster in United States history at more than ninety-one billions dollars.

Erwin Lutzer reported in his book entitled, *Where Was God?*, that after the hurricane, some Muslims said that Allah was heaping vengeance on the United States for the war in Iraq.

Christians claimed that Hurricane Katrina was judgment on New Orleans for Mardi Gras and the open acceptance of homosexual parades.

A Christian reporter in Israel said that the United States suffered a hurricane because it agreed with the Israeli policy that forced Jewish settlers out of the Gaza strip.

One Christian leader in America said that the Israeli Prime Minister suffered a stroke as a result of God's judgment against him for having divided God's land and given the Gaza strip away.

How horrible is this theology – to say that God could not stop His land from being divided, but He could at least send the former Prime Minister a stroke to get even?^{iv}

When tragedy strikes, we have the natural tendency to interpret it in light of what we believe God is trying to say. At times, we are terrible spokesmen for God.

What would we say, however, about these acts of God?

What about the cruel actions of mankind? Where was God on 9/11, or when the bombs went off in Madrid in 2004, or when other terrorist bombs exploded on July of 2005 in London, England.

Was God any less involved in these than in the tsunami of 2004, which took the lives of 240,000 people? Was He missing from His post?

John Piper and Justin Taylor, in their book *The Sovereignty of God in Suffering*, posed similar questions about random acts of cruelty. They referred to the same summer of 2005 when Dennis Rader was finally captured. He was called the “BTK killer” – Rader’s acronym for “bind, torture and kill”. Piper posed the question, “Why does God allow such things to happen? While we begged God to make them stop, why didn’t He?”

Open a newspaper and read of drunken drivers crossing medians and killing entire families. In a crowd the size of our church congregation, there will be hundreds, if not thousands of people who have experienced the pain of direct or indirect involvement with someone who has been mistreated, abused, raped, robbed, or even killed.^v

What do you say to them? What would you say to Job?

Approaches to “Acts of God”

I have categorized at least five different approaches to these issues that are called “acts of God”.

1. There is the trivial approach.

This person shrugs the issue off and says, “It really does not concern most people. God wants us to be happy and I guess the devil gets in the way sometimes.”

2. There is the hypocritical approach.

Those who use this approach are doing it without meaning it, of course!

These are believers who say, “God had nothing at all to do with that hurricane – it is just the forces of nature at work. God is in control, but He lets nature take its course.”

The reason I call this hypocritical is because most of these Christians will pray for rain when needed

and will pray for sunshine on their wedding day. They will thank God for the nice weather – automatically acknowledging that God has something to do with it.

I have read that after an earthquake had occurred in California, a group of pastors met for a prayer breakfast. As they discussed impassable expressways and ruined buildings, they agreed that for all practical purposes, God had nothing to do with the disaster. When one of the ministers closed the meeting in prayer, he actually thanked God for the timing of the earthquake that came at 5:00 in the morning when there were fewer cars on the expressways than at a later time and the sidewalks were largely empty. When he finished the prayer, his colleagues chimed in with a hearty, “Amen.”

How do you thank God for the timing of an earthquake if He was only an interested observer?^{vi}

3. There is the knee-jerk answer.

I heard on the news, one prominent Christian being asked, “Why wasn’t God around during such and such disaster?”

This Christians responded by saying, “Well, we’ve been telling God to get out of our classrooms and our schools and our political world for some time now . . . now that He’s gone, you can’t blame Him.”

This sounds like a good answer, but it leaves troubling questions about the character of God. Is God pouting, now that He has been kicked out of the schools? Has He taken His toys and gone home, now that prayer is no longer allowed and political agendas ignore Him?

By the way, if this were true and God has just gotten fed up with the planet, what does that say about His sovereign control and His omnipotent timing over the events of this world? What does that mean as it relates to this age of grace and the longsuffering of God?

In an attempt to get God off the hook by telling people that He left us just like we have wanted all along, we have actually become sovereign and He has become dependent on our actions, our moods, our legislations, and our policies.

4. There is the shallow approach.

This approach attempts to ignore the deeper questions about the nature and character of God and focuses instead, on easier problems. The church is bound up in this approach by virtue of her lack of theological depth or willingness to grow in understanding.

John Piper commented further that “the church has not been spending its energy to go deep with the unfathomable God of the Bible. Against the overwhelming weight and seriousness of the Bible, much of the church is choosing, at this very moment, to become more light and shallow and entertainment-oriented, and therefore has become irrelevant [while at the same time claiming to be so successful in being relevant. The truth is] the popular God of fun-church is simply too small and too sociable to hold a hurricane in His hand.”^{vii}

5. Finally, there is the unwilling response.

This is the approach we take when we just do not care enough to try to give an answer, which we are all guilty of. We really have a hard time condensing a solution into a three sentence answer.

Principles on “Acts of God”

Let me offer several principles to consider as you weigh your answer and acknowledge the sovereignty of God in the midst of natural disasters.

1. Principle #1: The suffering on earth is more widespread than we usually recognize.

The news reports take us to some city or village where people have died from a mudslide or an avalanche or a tornado. It seems that we are surrounded by natural disasters and our news media takes us from one crisis to another.

The truth is that asking why people die when natural disasters happen is similar to asking why people die.

Whether we know it or not, 6,000 people die every hour on this planet – most of them as a result of some sort of suffering. In the time it takes me to finish this sentence, 700 people will die. Many of them will die from disease, crime, accidents, suicide, starvation, and natural disasters.

In fact, more little children will die in our world from starvation than the total number of children and adults who died when Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast. The only reason natural disasters attract our attention is because they dramatically intensify the daily occurrence of death and destruction.^{viii}

The reality is that there is suffering and death on earth and it is more widespread that we can even comprehend.

2. Principle #2: The suffering world today is not the same world God created.

Paul wrote to the Romans,

. . . I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.

. . . For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.

. . . even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

. . . we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

(Romans 8:18-19, 22-23, 25)

In this paragraph, Paul makes a direct connection between the fall of man in sin and the curse of creation.

The world God originally created and the one that now erupts with earthquakes, mudslides, and floods is a different world system. It is out of joint. The created order is waiting for God to make it right.

One author wrote that nature is cursed because man is cursed; natural evil and brutality (which exists in the animal and physical world) is a reflection of moral evil, in that both are savage, ruthless, and damaging. Nature is a mirror in which we see ourselves.^{ix}

This could easily lead us to despair.

This is evident in the words of Voltaire, the French skeptic, who wrote, “We are insects living for a few seconds on atoms of mud and cannot understand the designs of an infinite Creator.”

The truth is that without the revealed word of God, we would have no answer to pain and suffering at all. William James would be right when he said that we all are like dogs left in a library – seeing the print but unable to read the words.^x

Mankind is fallen and nature with him, but neither has fallen out of the sovereign hand or plan and purpose of God. God has not walked away from the day-to-day control of His creation. While He certainly established physical laws by which He governs the forces of nature, those laws continuously operate according to His sovereign will.

Job will later hear the truth loud and clear:

He unleashes His lightning beneath the whole heaven and sends it to the ends of the earth. . . .

He says to the snow, "Fall on the earth," and to the rain shower, "Be a mighty downpour." . . .

The breath of God produces ice, and the broad waters become frozen.

He loads the clouds with moisture; He scatters His lightning through them.

At His direction they swirl around over the face of the whole earth to do whatever He commands them.

Whether for correction, or for His world, or for lovingkindness, He causes it to happen.

(Job 37:3, 6, 10-13 NIV, NAS)

One believing meteorologist has determined that there are over 1,400 references to weather terminology in the Bible. Many of them attribute the weather to the direct control and purpose of God.

David wrote in Psalm 147,

He covers the sky with clouds; He supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills. . . .

He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes.

He hurls down His hail like pebbles. Who can withstand His icy blast?

He sends His word and melts them; He stirs up His breezes and the waters flow.

(Psalm 147:8, 16-18 NIV)

The prophet Amos includes God's own testimony,

I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field has rain; another had none and dried up. (Amos 4:7 NIV)

The truth is that all expressions of nature, all occurrences of weather, whether it is a devastating tornado or a gentle rain on a spring day, are acts of God. God controls all the forces of nature, both destructive and productive on a continuous, moment-by-moment basis – which means the believer is never the victim of the powers of nature or fate or chance.^{xi}

The indirect cause of our death or suffering might be nature or violence, but the direct cause behind it all is the plan and purpose of God.

Jesus Christ, in His Sermon on the Mount, said,

. . . [the] Father . . . causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:45)

One theologian wrote, "Nothing – absolutely nothing – no evil thing or evil person or natural painful event falls outside God's ordaining will. Nothing arises, exists, or endures independently of God's will. So when even the worst of evils befall us, they do not ultimately come from anywhere other than God's hand."^{xii}

We sing the truth of this doctrine of sovereign control over nature and the affairs of mankind when we raise our voices with Isaac Watts great hymn, "I Sing the Mighty Power of God".

*I sing the mighty power of God,
That made the mountains rise;
That spread the flowing seas abroad,
And built the lofty skies.
I sing the wisdom that ordained
The sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at His command
And all the stars obey.*

*There's not a plant or flower below
But makes Thy glories known;
And clouds arise and tempests blow
By order from Thy throne;
While all that borrows life from Thee
Is ever in Thy care;
And everywhere that man can be,
Thou, God, are present there.^{xiii}*

Principle #1: The suffering on earth is more widespread than we usually recognize.

Principle #2: The suffering world today is not the same world God created.

3. Principle #3: The character and work of God on earth is different than we imagined.

Dear friends, if the Bible's revelation of God is that He is absolutely sovereign, then He is ultimately responsible.

Does the word back this up?

When we watch someone sifting through the rubble of their home, which of the following responses gives them the most comfort?

- “Well, I don’t know where God was and I’m sure He didn’t want this to happen.”
- Or, “This was allowed by God who is worthy of your trust and hope. He does what is right and one day, He will make His purposes clear.”

Nahum introduces us to a mysterious God, who is,

. . . in the whirlwind and the storm . . . (Nahum 1:3 NIV)

David writes of our God, who gives an account to no one,

But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. (Psalm 155:3)

Isaiah’s record agrees,

. . . as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand. (Isaiah 14:24 NIV)

In Isaiah 45:7, God says an even more shocking thing when He declares,

I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things.

The church today is running to somehow let God off the hook, while God is taking responsibility. It appears that we are more concerned about God’s reputation than He is.

This is God’s universe. That was His storm; His lightning; His flood; His sunshine; His winter blast . . .

Do you say that God is not in control of natural disasters? Tell that to Noah!

David wrote,

The heavens declare the glory of God . . . (Psalm 19:1a NIV)

Paul wrote that God’s creation and the works of nature reveal His attributes of power and strength. (Romans 1:20 paraphrased)

Why would God not keep everything sunshine and roses? I am going to give you six reasons in a moment, so just hold your horses.

Let us first be re-introduced to an uncomfortable God; to a God, as David wrote, who is altogether unlike us (Psalm 50:21 paraphrased).

Let us meet the God of which Solomon wrote,

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter . . . (Proverbs 25:2a)

This is the God of which we read:

Truly, You are a God who hides Himself . . . (Isaiah 45:15a)

The secret things belong to the Lord our God . . . (Deuteronomy 29:29a).

This is the God whose word to us might more often be simply:

Be still, and know that I am God . . . (Psalm 46:10a)

C. S. Lewis said that God actually speaks loudest to us when we suffer. Have you noticed that?

Lewis wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”^{xiv}

Purposes of “Acts of God”

What does the record of Job’s life thus far, and the perspective of scripture as God has revealed Himself, tell us are the purposes of suffering under the acts of God?

1. First, acts of God are a reminder of the true values in life.

Augustine once wrote, “God would give us something, but does not because our hands are full.”

When we are stripped of everything and our hands are emptied, we discover the most important things all over again.

I found it interesting that after Hurricane Katrina hit, Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco called for a statewide day of prayer, saying, “We need to turn to God for strength, hope, and comfort.”^{xv}

Had she said a few days before the hurricane that the state of Louisiana needed to turn to God in prayer for anything, she would have been mocked by the press and her colleagues, would probably have lost her credibility as a state leader, and perhaps, even lost her office.

Acts of God remind us of the truth about life.

2. Secondly, acts of God release our claim on the expectations of life.

The things to which we thought we had a right, disappeared. Bankruptcy, sickness, that accident reminded us that our expectation is in Him and Him alone.

3. Thirdly, acts of God give a realistic perspective on the brevity of life.

It could have been you in that storm. It could have been you on the 6:00 o’clock news.

When things are going well, we come under the delusion that life is a sure thing. Then our chest squeezes in pain and the next thing we know, we are hooked up to a dozen wires and the doctors are saying, “We got you here just in time.”

The truth is that whether we are aware of it or not, this could be our last day on earth as we know it!

4. Fourthly, disasters have a way of warning us about eternal judgment for all life.

“Nature reflects God’s gracious attributes, but also His attributes of wrath and justice.” (Job 37:6, 10-13)^{xvi}

Accidents that take the lives of others are a reminder of a coming judgment from which there is no escape.

In Luke 13, the Lord was preaching just after a tower had fallen that, in this unexpected disaster, had resulted in the death of eighteen people. The Lord Jesus used the incident in His sermon as an illustration that everyone was going to die. He said to them, in effect, “Are you ready for the judgment – have you repented of your sin?”

The suffering of people around the globe is intended to illustrate that fallen mankind will one day, either be released from suffering in glory or condemned to suffering forever. The unexpected loss of life reminds us that we all have an appointment with God.

David Miller wrote, “Natural disasters provide people with conclusive evidence that life on Earth is brief and uncertain.”^{xvii}

The next principle would then follow.

5. Fifthly, disasters are an invitation to walk with God through life.

God does not promise the absence of storms, but He does promise His presence in the storms.

So, as Warren Wiersbe once wrote, “Don’t grow bitter, grow better.”

Do not be like the man I read about recently, who had a rather funny response to a painful experience. He had been bitten by a dog and was informed by his physician that he indeed, had rabies. Upon hearing this, the patient immediately pulled out a pad and pencil and began to write. Thinking the man was making out his last will and testament, the doctor said, “Listen, this doesn’t mean you’re going to die. There’s a cure for rabies.”

“I know that,” said the man, “I’m making out a list of people I’m gonna bite.”^{xviii}

Disaster strikes and it is the megaphone of God saying, “Walk with Me.”

6. Finally, disasters in life are a reminder that suffering will one day be replaced, for those who believe, with everlasting joy.

Paul writes, “I can tell you that this present suffering cannot be compared to the glory that will be revealed in you.” (Romans 8:18 paraphrased)

When the *Titanic* went down, more than a thousand people went to a watery grave. The immediate causes were human error, an iceberg, insufficient lifeboats, frigid waters . . . but the ultimate cause was God, who had determined that their days on earth were completed.

After the news of the *Titanic* tragedy reached the world, the challenge was how to inform the relatives whether their loved ones were among the dead or the living. At the office of the White Star Line in Liverpool, England, a huge board was set up. On one side was a cardboard sign which read: “Known to be Saved,” and on the other, was a cardboard sign with the words: “Known To Be Lost”. Hundreds of people gathered to intently watch the updates. When a messenger brought new information, those waiting held their breath, wondering on which side the messenger would write and what name would be added to the growing list.

Although the travelers on the *Titanic* were first class, second class, or third class passengers, after the ship went down, there were only two categories: the saved and the lost.

Ladies and gentlemen, at the end of human history when the judgment of God is delivered, which will make any and all natural disasters seem very small, there will be only two categories that will matter – those who were known to be saved and those who were known to be lost.^{xix}

For the saved, suffering will begin to make sense. For the lost, suffering will only begin – to never end.

Are you ready – not just for the acts of God on earth, but for the final act of God’s judgment when you stand before Him on that day?

For those who believe, who are ushered into that heavenly city and newly designed earth, all suffering will make sense – in fact, it will probably no longer matter – for sorrow will be replaced with everlasting joy.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/28/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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- ⁱ Charles Swindoll, Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life (Multnomah, 1983), p. 91.
- ⁱⁱ Erwin Lutzer, Where Was God? (Tyndale House, 2006), p. xiii.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Paul E. Little, Know Why You Believe (Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), p. 83.
- ^{iv} Lutzer, p. 5.
- ^v John Piper and Justin Taylor, Suffering and the Sovereignty of God (Crossway, 2006), p. 35.
- ^{vi} Lutzer, p. 21.
- ^{vii} Piper and Taylor, p. 18.
- ^{viii} Lutzer, p. 18.
- ^{ix} Ibid., p. 13.
- ^x Ibid., p. 12.
- ^{xi} Jerry Bridges, Is God Really In Control? (NavPress, 2006), p. 57.
- ^{xii} Mark Talbot, quoted by Piper and Taylor, p. 47.
- ^{xiii} Isaac Watts, "I Sing the Mighty Power of God," in Praise Songs and Hymns (Zondervan, 1979), p. 9.
- ^{xiv} C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain (Harper/Collins, 1940), p. 91.
- ^{xv} Lutzer, p. 71.
- ^{xvi} Ibid., p. 67.
- ^{xvii} David Miller, quoted by Lutzer, p. 57.
- ^{xviii} Charles R. Swindoll, Hope Again (Word Publishing, 1996), p. 83.
- ^{xix} Lutzer, p. 74.