

“Clarity in Times of Catastrophe”

Job 1:13-22; Luke 13:1-5

Here in the first chapter of the book that bears his name, Job has the worst day of his life, and he is not given any explanations why. In less than a minute, catastrophe strikes and forever changes his life.

Four messengers deliver the terrible news to Job that he has lost his flocks, his fortune, and his family. As soon as one messenger finishes, another messenger comes. If you read verses 13-19, it will take you somewhere around 40 seconds. What no doubt took Job a lifetime to build, it only took 40 seconds for that world to fall apart.

We've already looked at Job's losses, but I want to spend some time dealing specifically with unexplained disaster. Part of Job's losses involved decisions made by other people. However, the most difficult losses were those that seemed to come from God Himself.

- he is told that the “fire of God” consumed the flock
- a great wind from the wilderness destroyed his children

We often refer to natural disasters and catastrophes as “acts of God,” for they are not the direct result of human will. What mere man has power over the wind and waves? We know that God alone is in control over nature, and when natural disasters occur, we often scratch our heads wondering why God allows it.

I'm sure that you will remember when on December 26, 2004, a powerful earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, set off a tidal wave that wreaked havoc and total devastation across the coastline of the Indian Ocean. The earthquake was the second strongest ever recorded and the estimated death toll made this disaster one of the top ten worst natural disasters of all time.

It was two minutes before 8am when the tremendous earthquake struck beneath the Indian Ocean some 160 miles west of Sumatra. Not only did it register at approximately a 9.3 magnitude and last nearly 10 minutes, but there is evidence that huge boulders weighing thousands of tons were pushed several miles along the ocean floor which caused a massive displacement of water.

It is estimated that the resulting tsunami had two times the energy of all the bombs used during World War II.

Within 15 minutes, the powerful waves were crashing the coast of Sumatra. At the north end of the island was a heavily populated region where waves reached 100 feet high in some places, destroying the coast and wiping out towns and villages. Entire communities were simply swept away by the water in a matter of minutes. The death toll in Indonesia was estimated at between 130,000 and 160,000 people, with an additional 500,000 people left homeless. Especially heart wrenching was that about a third of the victims were children.

The huge waves missed the coast of Indonesia on the north side and went on to Thailand, where between 5,000 and 8,000 people died. The tsunami also moved east across the Indian Ocean. In Sri Lanka, the tsunami came ashore about 90 minutes after the earthquake and approximately 35,000 people lost their lives and half a million others lost their homes. In addition, about 15,000 people died in India. The killer waves even reached 5,000 miles away in South Africa, where two people were swept away and drowned.

In total, about 190,000 people were confirmed dead with another 40,000 to 45,000 missing and presumed dead. Although billions of dollars of humanitarian aid poured in to the affected region in the aftermath of the disaster, some areas are still suffering from the massive devastation nearly 12 years later.

Disaster also strikes close to home. In the weeks surrounding the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina back in 2005, a team from the church I was serving at the time took a tractor trailer load of water and supplies to the ravaged area. For those who were affected, the images of disaster are etched into their minds. We remember the pictures of the thousands of people who were stranded in the Superdome. We vividly remember the video footage of families stuck on their rooftops waiting for rescue. More than a thousand died, and hundreds of thousands more displaced from their homes, many never to return.

One of the most difficult things that we will ever grapple with as human beings is the experience of natural disasters. We often struggle to understand the role of God behind natural disasters and catastrophes. Perhaps the two most asked questions in life are:

- Why did something like this happen?

- What kind of God would let something like this happen?

Erwin Lutzer - *“God’s silence in the presence of human anguish is one of the greatest mysteries of our existence. When faced with gratuitous human suffering, we are forced to rethink our faith, cope with our doubts, and debate whether God can be trusted...Just as earthquakes create aftershocks, natural disasters create religious aftershocks that challenge the faith of those who believe in God and simultaneously confirm the cynicism of skeptics. Either way, disasters force us to ask ultimate questions.”*

Catastrophes and natural disasters challenge the limits of our faith in a good and caring God. How can we watch the news coverage of orphaned children and have our faith still remain intact? Sometimes in our minds we find it hard to reconcile the existence of a good, all-powerful God with the presence of so much perceived injustice in the world we live in.

When reporting on the devastation of Katrina, one news anchor made the following statement —“If this world is the product of intelligent design, then the designer has some explaining to do.”

Such a statement sums up the questioning attitude that many people have. Of course as believers, we know that God owes us no explanations. We are accountable to Him, not the other way around. While we may not be given specific answers as to why certain things happen, in the Bible, God has given us truth that provides insight into the suffering we experience in this life.

We live by promises and not explanations.

I believe that there are some foundational principles we need to have if we are to ever have clarity in times of catastrophe. These principles can be drawn right out of this passage in Job chapter 1.

1. We live in a SIN-CURSED world (1:13-19)

“Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house, and there came a messenger to Job and said, ‘The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you.’ While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, ‘The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell

you.’ While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, ‘The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you.’ While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, ‘Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you.’”

No matter how bad a day you've had, I cannot imagine it being any worse than Job's. It is important to keep in mind that catastrophe does not happen in Job's life as the direct result of his sin. He is not being punished by God over something he did or did not do.

However, Job lives in a world of sin and death. He lives in a world where thieves pillage and plunder. He lives in a world where bandits rape and murder. He lives in a world where windstorms destroy and kill. Job lives in a broken, fallen world.

Even though Job is righteous, he is not immune to pain.

One of the worst and most widely discussed disasters known to man happened on November 1, 1755 when a massive earthquake struck the coastal town of Lisbon, Portugal. After the initial quake, which lasted nearly 10 seconds, other aftershocks continued to destroy buildings and homes. Fires broke out across the city and made rescue efforts nearly impossible. To further complicate matters, tsunami waves pounded the seaport, drowning hundreds and ripping ships away from their anchors.

In his book, "Where Was God," Erwin Lutzer tells the story:

Erwin Lutzer - *“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 the house of God might be spared. Indeed, some people even ran into the churches, seeking shelter by joining the priests who were conducting mass at 9:30 in the morning. Eyewitnesses say that the crowds had the terror of death on their faces, and when the second great shock came, priests and parishioners alike began to shriek, calling out to God for mercy. But heaven was silent to their pleas. Almost all of the churches in Lisbon were reduced to rubble, and the people in them killed.”*

Some religious leaders began to say that the earthquake was a sign of God's judgment against the city. Sir Thomas Kendrick, in his historical account of the Lisbon quake, quoted a priest who said:

T.D. Kendrick - *“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.”*

If that was so, why were churches full of worshiping people destroyed, and yet a street of brothels remained unaffected? In an attempt to explain the divine significance behind the disaster, people began assigning blame to other groups of people. If we would be honest, we do the same thing when something disastrous happens.

People of faith are not immune to suffering. We are not part of a privileged class of human beings who are exempt from all forms of disaster. Reality proves that fire destroys the homes of believers and unbelievers. Tornadoes and floods destroy the believer's property as well as the unbeliever's.

The world we live in is under a curse brought on by Adam's sin.

Genesis 3:17-19 - **“And to Adam He said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, You shall not eat of it, cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’”**

While it may not give us the specific answers to our personal experiences with pain and suffering, the third chapter of Genesis shows us what's wrong with the world we live in. God's truth says that we live in a fallen world, a world under a curse, and without a healthy understanding of this, we will not make it in times of catastrophe.

The world around us is not like it was when God originally created it. When God finished the act of creation, He declared it good and perfect, and so it was until Adam sinned. The world is still rocking and reeling from man's rebellion back at the beginning.

This is the point that Paul makes in Romans 8:

Romans 8:18-23 - “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

Earthquakes, hurricanes, and destructive forces of nature are signs that creation groaning like the pains of childbirth. The world that God originally designed has been subjected to futility and is ravaged by sin.

It is only by God’s grace that it is not completely destroyed.

2. We bow to a SOVEREIGN God

“Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Job acknowledges God’s sovereign control over his life. All that he had was given to him by God to begin with, and God had the right to take it all away if He so chose. Job’s confidence in catastrophe was not in what he possessed, but rather in who possessed him. His hope was not in his status, but in God.

People react to catastrophe in a variety of ways. Some try to explain away God’s involvement, while others are quick to assign blame to Him. Even in the church, we can be shallow in our faith and have this idea of God that makes Him subservient to nature rather than the other way around. Nothing happens in this life without God’s express permission.

John Piper & Justin Taylor - *“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 lighter and more 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."

Job has a worshipful response, which is amazing when you consider that he doesn't know why he's hurting. Rather than trivializing his pain, being hypocritical about his pain, or being knee-jerk in his reactions, Job declares what he knows to be true about God and worships in spite of his pain. He knows God is good.

Our perspective is extremely limited. When bad things happen, we are only able to see from our vantage point. We fail to remember that things are not as bad as they could be. In His grace, God restrains sin's curse in the world from completely destroying us altogether.

Does it not blow your mind to think that we are sitting on a chunk of dirt weighing 6 septillion pounds that at this very second is hurdling through space at 67,000 miles per hour, orbiting a star some 93 million miles away, while spinning at 1,040 miles per hour?

Did you know that the earth's axis of rotation is tilted 23.5 degrees relative to its plane of orbit, which results in the four seasons? If earth's tilt were at some value other than 23.5 degrees, we would have no seasons and the surface temperature at any point on the earth would be the same during both July and January. The equator would be intolerably hot all year and the poles would remain fairly cold. Ice would accumulate at the poles. The weather patterns would be stationary with permanently positioned warm and cold air masses. Some areas would continually be very humid while other areas would be quite arid. Only the mid-latitudes would be comfortable for human habitation and suitable for cultivation. Only about one half of our presently farmable lands could grow crops.

Have you ever considered why the earth rotates once every 24 hours? If the earth rotated more slowly, we would have more extreme day and night temperatures. We'd all freeze to death at night and burn up by day. Without the right amount of sunlight, there would be no sustainable plant growth. Vegetation would disappear.

When you go to the beach in a couple of months, do you ever wonder what keeps the 80 million billion gallons of water in the Atlantic Ocean confined to its space and not overwhelming our continent?

Does it frighten you to know that less than a thousand miles beneath your feet is an ocean of molten rock somewhere between 13,000 to 15,000 degrees Fahrenheit? If you go to Hawaii, that separation is as shallow as two miles. (Aloha!)

What about the 25 million meteors that enter earth's atmosphere every day, most of which burn to dust and settle to the surface?

What about the fact that the human body itself contains more explosive atomic energy than the 21-kiloton bomb that hit Nagasaki?

Perhaps a better question for us to ask is not why do disasters happen, but why are any of us still here? Nature itself ought to drive us to our knees in worship and reverential awe of God.

*I've seen it in the lightning, heard it in the thunder,
And felt it in the rain;
My Lord is near me all the time,
My Lord is near me all the time.*

*When the thunder shakes the mighty hills
And trembles ev'ry tree,
Then I know a God so great and strong
Can surely harbor me.*

Psalm 95:4-6 - "In His hand are the deep places of the earth; the strength of the hills is His also. The sea is His, and He made it, and His hands formed the dry land. Oh, come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our maker."

Yes, we live in a world that is prone to disaster and catastrophe, but in no way does this make God less powerful or sovereign. While we may never know why He allows certain things to enter our lives, one thing we can believe with certainty—He uses it for our good.

3. We trust in a SUFFICIENT savior

"In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong."

When processing catastrophe in our minds and hearts, we need to remember that we live in a sin-cursed world, and we bow before a sovereign God. We must also trust in a sufficient Savior.

Job 19:25-27 - “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

Job worships and trusts in a Savior who is more than sufficient. Rather than questioning His goodness, Job bows in worship.

Job could very well have sung:

*And I'll praise You in this storm
And I will lift my hands
For You are who You are
No matter where I am
And every tear I've cried
You hold in Your hand
You never left my side
And though my heart is torn
I will praise You in this storm*

Romans 8:28 - “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.”

Divine providence says that even catastrophes in life ultimately serves God's purposes:

- to remind us of what truly matters in life
- to release our claim on expectations in life
- to refocus our perspective on the brevity of life
- to reveal a picture of coming judgment in life
- to reinforce that Jesus Christ is all we need in life

Luke 13:3 - “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

The bottom line is that catastrophes in life provide people with conclusive evidence that our days on this earth are very brief and uncertain. None of us know what may happen to us on any given day. The only thing that matters is whether or not we are trusting in Jesus Christ.

On April 15, 1912, one of the worst sea disasters to ever happen was the sinking of the Titanic, what had been celebrated as an unsinkable ship. The ocean liner had 2,224 people on board when it struck an iceberg at approximately 11:40pm. Two hours and forty minutes later, she sank at 2:20am. Of those 2,224 people who were on board, 1,517 of them went to a watery grave in the frigid waters of the North Atlantic. Among the dead were 130 in first class, 166 in second class, 533 in third class, and 685 crew members.

After the news of the disaster had 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. At the top of one side of the board, a placard sign read “Known To Be Saved” while on the other side was another with the words “Known To Be Lost.” Hundreds of people gathered to watch for updates. When someone brought new information, those waiting held their breath, wondering on which side of the board he would write the name of their loved one.

Although the Titanic’s passengers had purchased tickets for first, second, or third class arrangements and lodging, there were only two categories after the ship went down—the saved and the lost.

At the end of human history when all of humanity is forever divided, there will only be two categories that will matter, and it won’t be according to social status, race, or how successful you were in business. In eternity, the only two categories will be those who were known to be saved and those who were known to be lost.

The only way to live with confidence in this life is to understand God’s truth by faith, the truth that we live in a sin-cursed world, faith that bows to a sovereign God and trusts in a sufficient Savior—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Charles Spurgeon - *“My entire theology can be condensed into just four words—Jesus died for me.”*

The gospel of Jesus Christ is our only hope. He is the answer to the crises and catastrophes that come our way in this life, for He alone has paid the price for sin. I can’t even begin to imagine trying to make sense of life apart from a relationship with Christ.

This is the kind of clarity we need in times of catastrophe.