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DISASTER, SOVEREIGNTY, AND MERCY

BY JOHN PIPER

*“When the waves of death compassed me, the floods of ungodly men made me afraid...
As for God, his way is perfect”—2 Samuel 22:5,31*

After the loss of his ten children owing to a “natural disaster” (Job 1:19), Job said, “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away: blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). At the end of the book, the inspired writer confirms Job’s understanding of what happened. He says Job’s brothers and sisters “comforted him over all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him (Job 42:11). This has several crucial implications for us as we think about the tsunami calamity in the Indian Ocean in 2004 (with over 300,000 dead), and all disasters which befall mankind.

1. Satan is not ultimate, God is.

Satan had a hand in Job’s misery, but not the decisive hand. God gave Satan permission to afflict Job (Job 1:12; 2:6). But Job and the writer of this book treat God as the ultimate and decisive cause. When Satan afflicts Job with sores, Job says to his wife, “shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10), and the writer calls these satanic sores “the evil that the LORD had brought upon him” (Job 42:11). So Satan is real. Satan brings misery. But Satan is not ultimate or decisive. He is on a leash. He goes no farther than God decisively permits.

2. Even if Satan caused the earthquake, he is not the decisive cause of death; God is.

God claims power over tsunamis in Job 38:8, 11, when He asks Job rhetorically, “who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb?...And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed?” Psalm 89:8-9 says, “O LORD God of hosts...Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them.” And Jesus Himself has the same control today as He once did over the deadly threats of waves: “Then he arose, and rebuked the wind and the raging of the water: and they ceased, and there was a calm” (Luke 8:24). In other words, even if [God allowed] Satan [to have] caused the earthquake, God could have stopped the waves.

3. Destructive calamities in this world mingle judgment and mercy.

Their purposes are not simple. Job was a godly man and his miseries were not God’s punishment (Job 1:1, 8). Their design was purifying not punishment (Job 42:6). But we do not know the spiritual condition of Job’s children. Job was certainly concerned about them (Job 1:5). God may have taken their life in judgment. If that is true, then the same calamity proved in the end to be mercy for Job and judgment on his children. This is true of all calamities. They mingle judgment and mercy. They are both punishment and purification. Suffering, and even death, can be both judgment and mercy at the same time.

The clearest illustration of this is the death of Jesus. It was both judgment and mercy. It was judgment on Jesus because He bore our sins (not His own), and it was mercy toward us who trust Him to bear our punishment (Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24) and be our righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). Another example is the curse that lies on this fallen earth. Those who do not believe in Christ experience it as judgment, but believers experience it as merciful, though painful, preparation for

glory. “For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope” (Romans 8:20). This is God’s subjection. This is why there are tsunamis [earthquakes, cyclones, hurricanes, etc].

Who suffers from this fallen world of natural disaster? All of us, Christians included: “And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Romans 8:23). For those who cast themselves on the mercy of Christ, these afflictions “worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17). And when death comes, it is a door to paradise. But for those who do not treasure Christ, suffering and death are God’s judgment. “For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17).

4. The heart that Christ gives to His people feels compassion for those who suffer, no matter what their faith.

When the Bible says, “Weep with them that weep” (Romans 12:15), it does not add, “unless God caused the weeping.” Job’s comforters would have done better to weep with Job than talk so much. That does not change when we discover that Job’s suffering was ultimately from God. No, it is right to weep with those who suffer. Pain is pain, no matter who causes it. We are all sinners. Empathy flows not from the causes of pain, but the company of pain. And we are all in it together.

And, Christ calls us to show mercy to those who suffer, even if they do not deserve it. That is the meaning of mercy—undeserved help. “Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you” (Luke 6:27).

What the Bible says about God’s rule over the earth

“And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar [King of Babylon, 500 B.C.] lifted up mine eyes unto heaven...and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?”—*Daniel 4:34-35*

“And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him...”—*Revelation 19:6-7*

“But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”—*Genesis 50:20*

“The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand”—*Isaiah 14:24*

“For the LORD of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it? and his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?”—*Isaiah 14:27*

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!”—*Romans 11:33*

“The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.”—*Proverbs 16:33*

“...God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction”—*Romans 9:22*

“...I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.”—*Isaiah 45:7*

“Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker!...Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands?”—*Isaiah 45:9*

“The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.”—*Isaiah 40:8*

“I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.”—*Ecclesiastes 3:14*

“Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”—*Luke 13:4-5*

Jesus Christ said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”—*Matthew 11:28*

