

A Christian Outlook on Disasters

Luke 13:1-5; Psalm 135:5-7

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What should be our outlook as Christians when we hear the news of devastating earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, and nuclear disasters? We are in the world, and all such disasters affect us whether we are thousands of miles away, or whether we are right in the midst of it all. For television, radio, and the internet have brought such disasters right into our own homes as we observe the shocking destructive power of such disasters and the unimaginable suffering of hundreds of thousands of those who did not die, but were left behind without food, water, clothing, heat, power, and shelter.

We hear some outspoken Christians declaring that it was due to Indonesia having the greatest number of Muslims of any nation in the world that God brought that powerful earthquake and tsunami in 2004 (killing approximately 230,000 throughout that whole area), or that it was due to Haiti having sold out to the devil (through the practice of voodoo) that God brought such a devastating earthquake upon that nation in 2009 (killing 200,000), or that it was due to the idolatry of Japan that God brought the most recent desolation and destruction by means of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster (killing thousands with many more repercussions likely to follow). On the other hand (and to the opposite extreme), we hear almost every day scientists, journalists, and newscasters speak of such disasters with absolutely no reference to God, but rather refer to such catastrophes as caused by “mother nature” or as being “accidents of nature.”

In the midst of so much confusion, error, arrogance, and unbelief, what is the biblical outlook that a Christian is to embrace as he/she beholds such calamities upon the earth, or even within one’s homeland? Let us not lean upon our own understanding (by way of a mere wisdom of this world), but rather let us as Christians seek the will of God and mind of Christ from the Holy Scriptures (which supply us with a heavenly wisdom that comes from the God who created all things and governs all things).

The main points of the sermon this Lord’s Day are the following: (1) God Rules over All (Psalm 135:5-7); (2) There Are Holy and Wise Purposes That Catastrophic Disasters Serve in God’s Absolute Control of All Things (Luke 13:1-5).

I. God Rules over All (Psalm 135:5-7).

A. A Christian outlook on disaster and calamity within the nations of this world must be founded upon this truth: God absolutely governs and controls all His creation. For as we see from Psalm 135:5-7, the Psalmist (by inspiration of the Holy Spirit) declares that God does whatever pleases Him in the heavens (i.e. in the extremities of the universe); on the earth (i.e. the dry land); in the seas or oceans; and in the deep places (like those places that lie far below the surface of the water or the surface of the ground where enormous continental plates of the earth’s crust shift causing earthquakes). In other words, if God does whatever pleases Him in every speck of space that exists in this vast universe, then nothing (absolutely nothing) that occurs in the universe, in the oceans, on the dry land, or in the deep places below the surface of the sea or land can be outside the absolute rule and control of our Triune God. For God’s absolute sovereignty over all things is firmly founded upon the fact that He alone (the Triune God) created all things in the heavens, upon the earth, and in the seas and that all things therefore exist for His Divine pleasure and glory as Creator (Revelation 4:11). The Lord created all things by the word of His power (Psalm 33:6-9), and thus, He upholds all things that He has created by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3—“upholding” is a present participle which indicates that the Son of God continues to uphold or carry “all things” by the word of His power—and if the Son of God is bearing and carrying all things, including all of the disasters that occur in this world, then He governs and

directs them all to the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, and mercy). Dear ones, according to the wisdom that comes from heaven above, the universe (in part or the whole) is not eternal (as some of the ancient philosophers maintained and even some scientists presently maintain); only the Triune Creator (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is eternal. Nor is the universe in all of its glory, complexity, design, and order the result of some impersonal, mindless force (like a big bang or explosion) that brought life in all of its beauty and variety into being. What God created by the word of His power, He governs and controls by the word of His power. God created all things that exist by the word of His power, therefore, God governs and controls all things that exist by the word of His power.

B. This truth eliminates the utter possibility of anyone else or anything else governing and directing all things (like disasters) within this universe.

1. First, an impersonal, mindless fate is not in control of all things, for in such a universe where an impersonal, mindless fate rules, only luck and chance rule. In such a universe, no order or design can exist: $1+1=2$ today, but tomorrow who knows what $1+1$ might equal because there is no certainty or order in a world of impersonal fatalism and chance. Everything is random and arbitrary. Today gravity keeps us firmly planted upon the earth, however, tomorrow we might float aimlessly into the sky. Language and communication would be impossible, for words would be subject to change and meaning every minute. Such a world would know continuous confusion and chaos at every turn—no reason could be given for life, death, disasters or anything else, but simply, that is the way it is today. Like a piece of wood in the current of a Niagara Falls, we would simply be forced and pushed along the current of life without purpose, meaning, or a plan. It ought to be clear to every reasonable person that an impersonal, mindless fate cannot be in control of the universe—such a view is completely contrary to reason, revelation, and experience.

2. Secondly, man is certainly not in control of all things as is evident from his many attempts to control such disasters, but without success. Man may take steps to prepare for disasters (and so we should do with whatever resources God has blessed us with), but man neither governs nor controls the disaster itself (whether the earthquake, the tsunami, the hurricane, the tornado, or the solar flare). A person does not even control one's own destiny (either one's own birth, who one's parents will be, where one will be born, or one's aging, or one's death). For all of one's attempts to prevent aging, death, poverty, and calamities, a person finds throughout life undeniable evidence that he/she is not in absolute control of his/her own destiny, but is rather subject to many events beyond his/her control.

3. Thirdly, Satan is certainly not in control of all things in the universe. He is a created being that fell from the holiness in which he was created, but to whom God has granted a limited power. Satan can only do what the unlimited Triune God allows him to do (Job 1:12; Job 2:6; Luke 22:31-32). Is it not clear that if Satan were in control of the universe that he would destroy Christianity, the Bible, and all Christians? He certainly has attempted to do so, but God has powerfully restrained him. If Satan were in control of all things, he would have prevented Christ from rising from the dead and ascending into the glory of heaven to be seated at God's right hand. If Satan governed everything that occurred in this world, he would see to it that he is ultimately victorious over God, and would judge God rather than being judged by God and being cast forever into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:10).

4. Fourthly, without apology or defense, the Triune God of the Bible declares that He and He alone works all things after the counsel of His own will (Ephesians 1:11). He alone rules over all things. He alone governs all things. He alone controls all things, and the "all things" over which He rules includes all disasters (whether earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, solar flares, wars, famines, drought, economic collapse, mass murder, and nuclear fallout). This is where the Christian outlook on disasters (like that which occurred this past week in Japan) must begin.

5. Dear ones, God's absolute sovereignty and control of all things in the universe (and particularly devastating disasters) will either bring great dread and terror to you, or it will bring great joy and

comfort to you. Why the different response?

a. Those who will find in God's absolute sovereignty dread and terror have not yet come to see or understand the love of a reconciled God who gave His only begotten Son for undeserving sinners who hated and despised Him. For if God is not reconciled to us, we have every reason to live in terror of His temporal judgments here upon earth and ultimately of His everlasting judgment in the Lake of Fire itself. For if God is not reconciled to us through the atonement of Christ, then we are not reconciled to Him; we are not forgiven and justified by faith alone in Jesus Christ; and we as guilty, unforgiven sinners abide under the just wrath of an infinitely holy God. In such a guilty condition, we will shudder as we hear these truths proclaimed today because we will realize we cannot hide from an absolutely sovereign and holy God who sees all, knows all, and controls all.

b. Dear ones, you don't have to live in such dread and terror, for there is a second response which we can have to God's absolute sovereignty and control of all things (including His control of all national and worldwide disasters). We may find in God's absolute sovereignty the greatest joy and comfort overwhelming our soul as we rest in the fact that God is reconciled to us (His holy wrath no longer abides upon us), and we are reconciled to God through trusting alone in Jesus Christ as our only righteousness before God and as our only hope of eternal salvation. Before a reconciled God, we cry out, "Abba" (an intimate form of Father, Daddy); we come unto His throne of grace and find in Jesus Christ a love, a peace, a joy, and a comfort that is like the almighty arms of our heavenly Father encompassing us and pressing us within His loving embrace. Instead of dread and terror at God's absolute sovereignty, we as Christians alone know and are assured that we need never fear that dread and terror of God's holy wrath in bringing temporal judgment in this life and everlasting judgment in the Lake of Fire, for God is working all things out for the good of those who love Him and are effectually called according to His everlasting purpose and decree (Romans 8:28,35-39). Dear ones, come to Christ today, embrace Him alone as your righteousness, and cast away forever all dread and terror of God and His holy and just wrath that abides upon all guilty, unforgiven, impenitent sinners.

II. There Are Holy and Wise Purposes That Catastrophic Disasters Serve in God's Absolute Control of All Things (Luke 13:1-5).

A. Before considering our text from Luke 13:1-5, let me identify the following purposes that catastrophic disasters serve in God's absolute control of all things. Turn with me to Job 37:12-13, where we find two purposes of God for disasters.

1. The first Divine purpose for disaster is for correction or literally, the rod (Job 37:13a). Here God uses the cloud filled with rain to burst forth in judgment upon wicked and godless men in bringing floods (reminiscent of the deluge at Noah's time) that destroy the crops, the livelihood, and the life of man. No doubt, under this heading we might include any disaster by which God would bring temporal judgment upon wicked people and nations of this world who have rejected, despised, or forgotten the Lord and His Christ, the Moral Law and Gospel of the Lord and His Christ, and the only true religion of the Lord and His Christ (namely, biblical Christianity). This purpose displays the vindictive justice of a holy God in pouring forth His wrath upon the wicked people and wicked nations of the world as a foretaste of the everlasting judgment to come (Romans 1:18—note the present, on-going, and continuous revelation of God's wrath in the world upon the wicked who suppress the truth God in unrighteousness, which is displayed in many ways, but must include the judgments God brings by way of disasters and calamities upon people and nations for their rebellion against the Lord and His Christ; see Psalm 2:10-12; Psalm 79:6).

2. Although not a Divine purpose for disasters, Elihu notes that the cloud filled with rain in Job 37:13 is "for his land" or better, "for his earth" (i.e. for the purpose of watering God's earth and bringing forth crops for food, filling wells with drinking water, and caring for the animal population that depend upon God's kindness in supplying all their needs which in turn supplies the needs of man). Here, dear ones, we see

that the Lord not only shows forth his justice upon the wicked, but also in His kindness sends forth the rain and the sunshine upon both the wicked and the righteous alike (Matthew 5:45). And this goodness and longsuffering on God's part in supplying the material needs of even wicked sinners and in delaying His righteous judgment upon those who despise the Lord and His Christ becomes the basis for a sincere appeal to them to turn in faith to Christ and repentance of their sin (Romans 2:4).

3. The second Divine purpose for disaster that comes from the cloud filled with rain in Job 37:13 is "for mercy." Here it would seem that God brings the flood that destroys the crops and livelihood of man not only to judge impenitent people and nations, but also to show mercy to people and nations whose eyes in such disasters are opened to see the vanity of trusting in the things of this earth as the source of their safety and security, as the source of their joy and happiness, and as the source of their peace and comfort. God brings disaster so as to have the ultimate mercy upon people and nations by enlightening their minds to behold the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, so that they might embrace Christ by faith alone and might be set free from God's righteous judgment forever.

a. Perhaps as you evaluate your own life, you can look back and see the mighty hand of God's mercy in turning you to Himself by means of a tragedy, a calamity, a disaster, a death, a great loss of some kind (God used the threat of impending judgment upon Nineveh as a mercy to turn them to the Lord, Jonah 3:5). Dear ones, if that is what God used in your life, rejoice in His rich and free mercy to you. In this case, God brings disasters to glorify His grace and His mercy to undeserving sinners. Thus, the same disaster that brings God's righteous judgment upon the deserving wicked may also bring God's rich mercy upon undeserving sinners in drawing them to see that the Triune God alone is their "refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

b. Dear ones, when disasters of such magnitude like those that God directed upon Japan last week strike, Christians are not altogether exempt from the effects of hunger (from the stores being empty and the food supply being contaminated), thirst (from the electricity be shut down so that water does not flow into their homes, and the water supply contaminated), disease (from the lack of proper sanitation and the effects of radiation), homelessness (from the destruction of entire cities by earthquake and tsunami). But dear ones, it is in such dark times of calamity that the gospel of Christ and power of God shines forth to unbelieving sinners who see the hope of Christians who suffer the same disaster, but do so with the hope that God causes all things to work together for their good and that nothing can separate them from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Dear ones, the suffering of Christians is often used by the Lord as a mercy to unbelievers all around them in drawing them to Christ (Acts 27:35-36).

B. And now as we briefly consider the words of the Lord Jesus (in Luke 13:1-5), we shall see another important part of our outlook as Christians that ought to be evidenced in our life when we see or hear of disasters that God has brought upon the people and nations of the world.

1. In this inspired account in the life of Christ, the Lord is presented with a real tragedy (not a hypothetical tragedy) in which certain Galileans were slaughtered by Pilate (the Roman Governor that also condemned Christ to death) as these Galileans were offering their sacrifices in the very Temple of God in Jerusalem (Luke 13:1). When this happened, we do not know, but it was apparently not something done in secret (and was no doubt known by the Lord). Perhaps these Galileans had been dispersed followers of Judas of Galilee who led many away from loyalty to Caesar and Rome (Acts 5:37).

2. The Lord Jesus responds by indicating that those who related this story to Him "supposed" that the Galileans who suffered this cruel death by the sword of wicked Pilate were greater sinners than all other Galileans (Luke 13:2). Why? Because in the minds of these Jews who related this disaster to the Lord, the severity of the disaster and tragedy determined the degree of sin of a person or of a nation. Thus, these Jews would likely have joined Job's three friends in condemning Job for the alleged enormity of his sin as evidenced by the disasters and calamities Job endured.

3. What likely motivated these Jews in relating this story about the Galileans (between whom there was a fierce rivalry) was not righteousness or mercy, but rather pride and conceit. For the Lord denies their supposition that these who suffered this cruel death at the hand of Pilate were worse sinners than other Galileans, and the Lord puts the ball back into the court of these self-righteous Jews by declaring, "But, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). In effect, Jesus chides these Jews, "You, Jews, want to make yourselves look good and holy because of the slaughter of these Galileans in the Temple of God, yet I say unto you, that you need to consider your self-righteousness and your pride, and turn to a merciful God in forgiveness and repentance for your own sin." The Lord does not deny that the Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate were sinners, but that they suffered this disaster because they were greater sinners than others, He does deny.

4. The Lord then relates to these Jews of Jerusalem a recent disaster that they (no doubt) would have been familiar with that befell certain Jews in Jerusalem (Luke 13:4). If these Jews wanted to make an issue out of the sin of the Galileans, the Lord would direct their attention to a calamity in Jerusalem and show them the unrighteousness and inconsistency of their judgment of the Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate. Again, we do not know any details about this tragedy ordained by God that befell these 18 souls upon whom the tower of Siloam fell there in Jerusalem. It would seem that we have here something of either a territorial pride (Galilee vs. Judea) or a spiritual arrogance (Galilee, or Samaria, was led into idolatry by Jeroboam and first delivered into captivity vs. Judah which had several righteous kings and reformations and was led into captivity after Galilee or Samaria).

5. Once again, the Lord consistently applies a righteous standard of judgment that those 18 Jews who died beneath the Tower of Siloam when it crumbled and fell upon them were not greater sinners than others living in Jerusalem (Luke 13:5). And once again, the Lord turns the spotlight upon the pride and self-righteousness of those who almost seemed to delight in the suffering of others because it evidenced the great sin of others, and on the other hand, their own supposed righteousness because they had not suffered the same calamity: "But except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." The Lord may have had in view as a near and partial fulfillment the destruction of Jerusalem that was to come upon Jerusalem in 40 years from that time, but ultimately, the Lord had in view not a mere bodily perishing upon earth, but rather an eternal perishing and suffering in hell.

C. I close, dear ones, with application to our own lives?

1. What was your first response when you heard about the earthquake and tsunami in Japan? A response of pride: "They must be greater sinners than others." Or, a response of humility: "Unless I repent (or we as a nation repent), we will all likewise perish and suffer a great disaster."

2. Yes, Japan is a land of idolatry and false religion. But so is the United States. In fact, it may be reasonably argued that because the United States has had greater light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and God's Moral Law than Japan, that we are far more accountable for our official toleration of idolatry and false religion in our national pantheon of gods. We, dear ones, are a nation of great idolatry and false religion.

3. Were there no Christians at all affected by the earthquake, tsunami, and radiation leaks from the nuclear reactors within Japan? Yes, Japan is an idolatrous nation and deserves the righteous judgment of a holy God. But what about the Christians who suffered alongside the idolaters. Did love for the brethren and prayer for their steadfastness and the desire to see the mercy of God displayed to undeserving sinners in the midst of such disasters lead you to plead with God to temper His judgment with mercy? Should this not be found in the prayers of the Christian, "Lord, remember mercy in the midst of thy righteous judgment."

4. Are we as Christians more like the priest and the Levite that passed on the other side of the road when they saw the Jew that was beaten, robbed, and left for dead by thieves, or are we more like the good Samaritan who helped in every lawful way that he could the one who is overwhelmed by such a

disaster? Are we as Christians more like the Pharisee who boasted of his own righteousness and smugly condemned repentant sinners, or more like the repentant sinner who beat his chest crying out to God, “God be merciful to me a sinner”?

5. Do such disasters cause you as a Christian to fall before the Lord in utter amazement, awe, and wonder at the power of God? Does the holy fear of the Lord (not a slavish dread and terror of the Lord) grip your soul in realizing that if that which God has created or that which God controls and directs (like devastating earthquakes, tsunami, hurricanes, tornadoes) has such power, how much more must be the infinite power of our all-powerful God?

6. Is the goodness and longsuffering of God (in delaying such disasters in your life) leading you to forget God, to think his patience with you is an implicit approval of your sinful lifestyle, to make you proud and self-righteous, and to harden you in your sin? Or is the goodness and longsuffering of God in delaying such disasters upon you, your families, your communities, or your nation leading you to humble yourselves in thankful gratitude to the Lord for his undeserved mercy and leading you to turn in faith to Christ and to repent of your pride, unbelief, fear, covetousness (which is idolatry), and lusts of the flesh?

7. Finally, have these disasters that are all directed by God left you apathetic, indifferent, and lukewarm in your faith and repentance, or has your zeal for the Lord been kindled afresh as you have beheld the mighty acts of the Lord in history?

What, dear ones, has been your outlook as a Christian in regard to the recent disaster in Japan? May the Lord grant us all the grace to heed these penetrating words of our Lord, “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”

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