

NATURAL DISASTER AND PASTORAL COMFORT

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First, we must acknowledge that the most troubling problem emerging from any large scale natural disaster is not that people die. That is a real human and emotional issue, but not the most significant one. Hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, fires, tornados or floods do not change the statistics on the number of the human race experiencing death by even one digit. A typhoon in Bangladesh swept away between 300,000 and 500,000 lives in 1970,¹ and the worldwide influenza pandemic of 1918 exterminated between 50,000,000 and 100,000,000,² but neither of these catastrophic events changes the grim prognosis that *every* member of the human race will die. We are dying at a hundred percent rate already.

It is also not the overarching dilemma that natural events destroy what we have made—our homes, buildings, roads, etc. No one should be surprised when a house or building is brought to nothing in a mudslide in view of the fact that God declares that decay will eventually destroy all things anyway.³ We are promised the cataclysmic destruction of the entire earth as we know it in the future.⁴ Some have lost these things earlier than they had hoped they would, but *that* they would be destroyed should never be in debate with evangelicals. So there is nothing new here either.

Furthermore, it should not be a conundrum to us that many people face an alteration of their existence due to catastrophe. A new order will come to everyone eventually; heaven and a new earth will be experienced by some,⁵ and hell for others. Death alters everything, as will Christ's return.

We should also remember that there is no meaningful dissimilarity in the horribleness of death in a natural disaster as opposed to normal times. If it were possible to ask a man in the sanitary environment of a hospital what it is like to breathe his last breath when he is drowning in his own fluid, he would tell you it is every bit as horrific as being

¹NOAA News Online (<http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories/s334b.htm>).

²Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu). Some estimates are lower (20,000,000 to 40,000,000) but even the lower estimates make it the worst pandemic in history.

³Matthew 6:19; Romans 8:20-25.

⁴2 Peter 3:11-13.

⁵2 Peter 3:13.

drowned in a flood. Because God mercifully allows the body to experience shock in times of fright, many will thankfully have some anesthesia when they die, whether natural or narcotic. But death is still a ravaging enemy *wherever* and *however* it is encountered. Some may linger in the hospital room for days before they die, while others under the rubble caused by an earthquake painfully expire from dehydration. A woman may die instantly when a hurricane pushes her house down, while her sister may end her two-year struggle with an insidious malignancy with screams. Which is easier?

Everyone will die; everyone will lose whatever he or she has; everyone will face a completely altered existence; everyone will experience the horror of last moments on earth. We have already bought into all of these as theological verities. So what is so arrestingly unique about a natural disaster? Why do we become poetic and communicative about it? Why do we *not* hear news commentators saying, “Today an earthquake in India did the normal: It took a few thousand lives, destroyed property, took people to another existence and did it in the typically horrible way. The stock market was up today with heavy volume.”

We are alarmed because a natural disaster brings dramatic *focus* to these universal inevitabilities. It paints them in vivid color right before our faces so that we cannot escape them. We see how impotent *we* are. Our invincibility evaporates; our vulnerability parades in front of us and mocks us. We watch as people just like us, going about their business, lose everything and die in a moment. It grabs us precisely because it *is* us we are hearing about. Natural disaster is not about something *new* happening, or even about something *unusual* happening, but about something that has *always* happened and is inescapable for each of us—and more precisely, for *me*.

All death and destruction comes from the most cataclysmic event of history, the fall of man, and from the resulting just judgment of God.⁶ Our natural world groans under the resultant bondage.⁷ Believers, of all people, should learn to reconcile themselves to this fact. One pastor was reminded by God after the loss by flood of all his awards and letters from important people not to be concerned. Reportedly, God said to him, “Don’t worry . . . I was going to burn them anyway.” Whether he heard these words directly or not, the sentiment was true.⁸

The certainty that death, decay, and destruction are going to happen anyway to all of us and to all of our things, however, does not eradicate the internal pain that believers may experience. Even Christ, who said, “Let not your heart be troubled,” was “distressed and troubled,” and “deeply grieved, to the point of death” by the weight of sin placed on Him. With perfect knowledge and absolute trust, He still worked out His peace with the cross on

⁶Gen. 3.

⁷Romans 8:18-25. This passage shows without question the connection between man’s fall and the bondage that all nature suffers under. Creation awaits the freedom that men will experience from their sins. At the restoration of all things, the new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1) are seen as a world in which righteousness dwells. When redeemed man is set free from his sin in this last sense, the universe itself is restored to its original freedom from decay simultaneously.

⁸Charlie “Tremendous” Jones, as quoted in a sermon by Dr. Ron Dunn, date unknown.

Gethsemane. Granted, His was an infinitely bigger burden than ours, but there is surely a lesson here.

Some of the greatest of saints have also been depressed about losses or disruptions (David, Elijah, Spurgeon, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones, etc.). Ongoing emotional troubles remind us that disaster of any sort is often an immense trial, spinning off secondary disasters, like hurricanes spin off tornadoes, even among believers. If this is so, we more-average saints must have much aid in understanding and coping with natural disaster when it affects us or those we love dearly. What can help?

When disaster occurs, the mental/emotional state of the believer is directly bound to his spiritual perception. Ultimately, and often immediately, believers can overcome a debilitating freefall into anxiety over what has transpired. It becomes the pastoral job not only to empathize, but to lead believers to have a biblical perspective about disaster and loss as soon as possible—preferably *prior* to the event occurring. It is concerning this perspective that I wish to direct our attention.

NATURE OBEYS GOD

The disciples said of Jesus, “even the winds and the sea obey Him?”⁹ This verse is often employed apologetically with skeptics for the purpose of proving that Jesus is actually God. The believing world has almost always asserted, in pacific times, that God controls nature. The farmer prays to God for rain for his dry fields, just as the Christian schoolteacher requests from God clear skies for the class picnic, because we assume that God has everything to do with it. But does this general, almost presupposed, evangelical belief extend far enough when times are more difficult?

As an illustration of how God’s oversight of nature may be addressed, the Second London Baptist Confession clarifies the extent of God’s control in its first and second section under “Divine Providence.” It is worth a careful reading:

1. God who, in infinite power and wisdom, has created all things, upholds, directs, controls and governs them, both animate and inanimate, great and small, by a providence supremely wise and holy, and in accordance with His infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable decisions of His will. He fulfils the purposes for which He created them, so that His wisdom, power and justice, together with His infinite goodness and mercy, might be praised and glorified. (Job 38:11; Ps. 135:6; Isa. 46:10,11; Matt. 10:29-31; Eph. 1:11; Heb. 1:3)
2. Nothing happens by chance or outside the sphere of God’s providence. As God is the First Cause of all events, they happen immutably and infallibly according to His foreknowledge and decree, to which they stand related. Yet by His providence God so controls them, that second causes, operating

⁹Mark 4:41. Also Luke 8:24 states that Jesus “rebuked the wind and the surging waves, and they stopped, and it became calm.”

either as fixed laws, or freely or in dependence upon other causes, play their part in bringing them about. (Gen. 8:22; Prov. 16:33; Acts 2:23)¹⁰

This historic confession has not overstated the biblical principle. The Psalmist speaks convincingly concerning the control of God over natural events:

Whatever the Lord pleases He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places. He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth. He makes lightening for the rain; He brings the wind out of His treasures.¹¹

It was God who ordained each of the natural plagues on Egypt, for instance, including turning water to blood, filling the land with frogs, sending hail, and devastating locusts, etc. Even Pharaoh recognized this.¹²

Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. And the Lord rained hail on the land of Egypt.¹³

Prior to this, the Noahic flood was also attributed to the direct intervention of God. Its finish was also God's act.

For after seven more days, I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights; and I will blot out from the face of the land every living thing that I have made.¹⁴

But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided.¹⁵

God fought for Israel by sending large hailstones on the Amorites:

As they fled from before Israel, while they were at the descent of Beth-horon, the Lord threw large stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died from the hailstones than those whom the sons of Israel killed with the sword.¹⁶

Jonah experienced God's sovereign control over the natural sphere.

¹⁰ *A Faith To Confess: The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 Rewritten in Modern English* (Leeds: Carey Publications, 1975), 23.

¹¹ Psalm 135:6-7.

¹² Exodus 9:27-28.

¹³ Exodus 9:23.

¹⁴ Genesis 7:4.

¹⁵ Genesis 8:1.

¹⁶ Joshua 10:11.

So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head.¹⁷

And regardless of one's millennial view, there can be no question that the vision of John on the isle of Patmos reiterates that God is perfectly in control of all nature and uses it however He wishes, especially in judgment.¹⁸

GENERAL AND SPECIFIC PROVIDENCE

In James P. Boyce's *Systematic Theology* attention is given to what he considers a false distinction between *general* providence and *special* providence. By this the noted early Baptist theologian means that some distinguish between God's general care of the universe, and the "minute care by which some events are supposed to take place immediately under his supervision or by his direct providential action." He states:

It is unquestionably true that the acts of Providence extend to the minute objects and specially marked events. But this is no reason for making this distinction, which would seem to imply an indifferent, careless providence about all things else. The truth is that the providence is of such a nature as to reach every natural event by the operation of general laws. It is a marked proof of the wisdom of God that he can so direct all the affairs of the universe as, without need of special action, to accomplish all the events He chooses. All providence, therefore, is general, because operated through general laws. It is also special, because every individual event comes to pass under God's own inspection, and through His one will and work.¹⁹

Boyce quotes Princeton's A. A. Hodge in this respect, who says, "A general and a special providence . . . cannot be two different modes of divine operation." He continues:

The same providential administration is necessarily at the same time general and special, for the same reason, because it reaches without exception equally to every event and creature in the world. A general providence is special because it secures general results by the control of every event, great and small, leading to that result. A special providence is general because it specially controls all individual beings and actions in the universe. All events are so related together as a concatenated system of causes, and effects, and conditions, that a general providence that is not at the

¹⁷Jonah 4:6-8.

¹⁸See Revelation 16:18, etc.

¹⁹James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Christian Gospel Foundation, reprint, 2006), 227.

same time special is as inconceivable as a whole which has no parts, or as a chain which has no links.” [*Outlines of Theology*, 266]²⁰

As those most responsible for the spiritual comfort and strengthening of the courage in our people, we must not avoid the obvious in our counsel and preaching related to natural destruction. To say that God is not involved in natural calamitous events and that what has happened is entirely due to mere natural causes untended and unintended by God is simply untrue. And it is patently unhelpful to the sufferer. We cannot blame all weather patterns either on chance or “Mother Nature.” In fact, the personifying of nature through that term is evidence that we cannot comfortably live with an impersonal universe in which God has no caring involvement. And “chance” by definition cannot do anything, as if it had powers or were human-like. God is the ultimate cause of all secondary causes and takes full responsibility. It may be subzero weather, but “not even the sparrow falls apart from the father’s will.”²¹ There is no such thing as nature out of control.

THE GOODNESS OF GOD

The doctrine of the providential care of God is not complete, however, in its assertion that God controls nature. This essential doctrine so vital for pastoral care emphasizes God’s goodness as well, not just for the believer, but also for His universe.

The acts of God through nature may be construed wrongly. When a criminal is apprehended and put in prison, is it good or bad? Most of us would affirm that it is a good thing for criminals to be taken out of society and put into isolation. However, the criminal does not think so. Perspective is everything—but not just perspective, rather, righteous perspective. And this perspective about the goodness of God is what we must convey to those suffering when an event of nature has caused damage and death.

Here are some *good* reasons for natural disaster coming from a caring and *good* God:

1. *God is recognized as powerful and not to be trifled with.* God has often asserted that cataclysmic events were done to display His power to men (Exodus 9:14-16; 14:31).
2. *Society is warned of the greatest calamity, eternal judgment.* A physical disaster is nothing compared with eternal damnation. A hurricane is an announcement: “If you don’t repent, worse than this is coming” (Luke 13:1-5).
3. *Some people are deservedly punished for their rebellion.* The Bible states “the wrath of God is revealed [lit. *is being revealed*] from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18). Hurricanes are just one of the ways that might happen (cf. Psalm 7:11-13). We should rejoice in the goodness of God in winning His victory over the ungodly.

²⁰Ibid., 227.

²¹Matthew 10:29.

4. *Some true believers are tested or disciplined and made stronger in their faith.* The same storm that judges a non-believing man may be the crucible of testing and/or chastising for a true Christian, and will toughen and purify him for the future (James 1:2-3; Hebrews 12:5-11).
5. *Believers may be taken to heaven; and some enemies of God may be removed from the earth.* This is a reality that is hard to accept, but nonetheless true. The Bible says our days are ordained by God even before one of them is lived (Psalm 139:16). He also promises that many rebellious people will face a calamitous end (Psalm 73:18-19).
6. *The godly are given an opportunity to love sacrificially.* Because of the nature of the true believer, you will always find Christians among those on the scene helping to relieve the distress (1 John 3:17; Gal. 6:10). Their love may point many to Christ.²²

GOD'S DISPOSITION TOWARD THE BELIEVER

There is even more reason for comfort for believers in particular. Peter reminded believers for all time that they were “called to this, to inherit a blessing.”²³ God, in fact, showers the believer with blessing. David wrote, “How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.”²⁴ This promise of blessing throughout the Scripture toward God’s own finds its origin in the Abrahamic promise in Genesis 12. Among other promises, all of which are fulfilled in Christ and accrue to the believer,²⁵ is this promise of blessing:

And I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.²⁶

This “blessing” or favor of God, on the lives of the believer is the birthright of all Christians, Jew or Gentile.²⁷

It is out of this confidence in God’s disposition toward the believer that Paul can assert in Romans 8:28 that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who

²²Adapted from “Do Hurricanes Just Happen?” Jim Elliff, 2004, <http://www.bulletininserts.org/hurri.html>.

²³1 Peter 3:9.

²⁴Psalm 139:16-17a.

²⁵In my view, the land promise in chapter 12 is realized for the believer in the new earth. See Hebrews 11:8-16,39-40.

²⁶Genesis 12:2-3.

²⁷Because we are all “sons of Abraham” by faith, all New Testament believers share in the promise. This is clearly discussed by Paul in Galatians 3.

love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”²⁸ Verse 29 places this “good” in context. Each aspect mentioned proceeds to the final and quintessential good gift of glorification. On the one hand, we can say, “whatever ends well must be working out for the good.” But, there is more here. In verse 29 Paul ties the good He is working out to sanctification (the unfolding of his “purpose” in verse 28), for those who are foreknown are predestined to be “conformed to the image [icon or likeness] of His Son.”

*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?*²⁹

God purposes to make us eternally happy and to pour out “the riches of his kindness toward us.”³⁰ In preparation for that unadulterated happy state, He is subjecting us to whatever is necessary for our sanctification. In Paul’s thinking, the conforming activity of God, consisting of all that makes us like Him, is part of the good He “works out” for us prior to our final glorification. Suffering is good for the believer because conformity to Christ is good.

God intends either discipline or testing by what is suffered, and both produce the good of improved sanctification.³¹ We are not allowed to take “natural calamity” out of that package of necessary suffering for the believer. God in His providential care designs the calamity as a blessing in sometimes macabre dress. We are to “consider it all joy . . . when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.”³² Suffering is a foundational aspect of sanctification. “What if we have more of the rough file, if we have less rust!” wrote puritan Thomas Watson.³³

As I stated, the final good is glorification. In the same chapter of Romans Paul asserts that all future “heirs” will “suffer with him.” He is describing the “groaning” that all creation experiences due to the entrance of sin into the world. Now our bodies are subjected, along with all of creation, to the “futility” that man’s sin brought into the universe. It is not an easy “futility,” or a gentile “corruption” that we face. But all will

²⁸Romans 8:28.

²⁹ Romans 8:28-32.

³⁰Ephesians 2.

³¹see Hebrews 12:10 where we are told that discipline is “for our good, so that we may share His holiness.”

³²James 1:2-3.

³³Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986 reprint), 29.

change for the believer who is now suffering the ravages of this corrupt world. He will one day be glorified at “the redemption of our body.” Nature will be set free from that corruption, and this includes our own bodies first of all. In fact, it is the setting free of our bodies that precipitates the creation’s freedom. It is waiting for us. Paul says, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us.”³⁴ What hope we have!

In our pastoral preaching and counsel during natural calamity, we do no service to those in physical and mental pain to avoid speaking of the sovereignty of God and the divine plan of sanctification ending in glorification. Their suffering is not wasted and God is good in it all. Though the sufferer is brought low and will often struggle through immense pain and loss, there is a realistic hope for him, both in what the losses will bring to his spiritual development and in his future anticipation of glory. We will honor God the most, not by attempting to shield people from understanding His attributes and purposes, but by asserting His kindness to believers regardless of the form in which His blessings are administered. In heaven we will appreciate and praise God for the timing and perfect execution of His plans, for God does all things well. Though we will be imperfect in our comprehension on earth, we must lead our people, in as much as it is possible for now, to rejoice and have faith in the God who is both sovereign and good.

³⁴I prefer the reading “in us” rather than “to us” due to these facets of Paul’s argument: 1. We will be glorified *with* Christ (vs. 17), 2. “The anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing *of* the sons of God,” and, 3. Paul ties the glory coming to the universe to the “freedom of the glory *of* the children of God.” These passages may be studied in context to verse 18. Emphasis mine.