

DISASTERS, JUDGEMENT & LOVE

Author's note: *This paper was written 3 days before the devastating Japanese earthquake/tsunami which dwarfed (understatement of the year) the New Zealand quake. I have left this paper unmodified as the thoughts contained within are still very relevant – and can be applied to any disaster discussion, when they occur.*

Introduction

On Tuesday the 22nd February, 2011 a 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck Christchurch, New Zealand's second largest city, causing widespread damage and multiple fatalities. At least 166 people have been confirmed dead (as of the 7th March 2011) with the final death toll expected to be well over 200, making the earthquake the second-deadliest natural disaster ever recorded in New Zealand (after the 1931 Hawke's Bay earthquake).

Naturally, a disaster of this magnitude conjures up a mixture of emotions, responses and opinions – the following are a few that have been publicly expressed by people of various religious beliefs since the earthquake struck:

- "This is God's judgement because of our sins."
- "This is not God's judgement because He loves us."
- "This is God's warning because He loves us."
- "I am terrified, what if there are more disasters coming?"
- "How could God let this happen?"

The purpose of this paper is to provide some biblical grounding so we can understand God's heart when such questions are asked, and so we can give hope, encouragement and intelligent answers to those who desperately need it during times of shaking.

Judgement myths:

1. God's disaster judgments stopped in the Old Testament

The teaching goes like this: Since Jesus' victory on the cross, mankind is now in the 'Age of Grace', meaning that God's wrath has now ceased.

This is en-vogue teaching nowadays and probably originated to counter-balance the over-emphasised judgement teaching of yesteryears. The problem with counter-balancing teaching is that if we are not careful, the pendulum swings too far and becomes over-balanced in the opposite extreme.

Back to the myth. Consider the following examples...

Example 1: The Book of Revelation.

It may be a small oversight on our part, but the last book of the New Testament happens to be full of disaster judgements.

Example 2: Ananias and Sapphira.

Not long after the birth of the New Testament Church, Ananias and Sapphira attempted to deceive the leadership and brought God's judgement upon themselves.

⁹But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. **Acts 5:9-11**

No, God's judgements have not stopped with the Old Testament.

2. God sends disasters when people are wicked

This may be true (as seen in the examples above), but it must not be a blanket statement or concrete belief. If God sends disasters when people are wicked, why then, did no catastrophic earthquake destroy Nazi Germany? Why did no mammoth tsunami submerge the killing fields of Cambodia? More recently, why did Hurricane Katrina destroy significantly more churches than casinos and other places of 'ill repute'? Why do so many murderous dictators live to an old age while many missionaries die young?¹

Jesus challenged this very thinking in his time.

¹There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." **Luke 13:1-5**

Jesus stated the obvious, that sometimes disaster strikes for no apparent reason. He emphasised the utmost importance of repentance, and living right with God, because we will all die one day, hopefully not because of a disaster, but we will all die, and our eternal destination is the issue.

3. God is so vindictive, He's just looking for any excuse to wipe us out

Many people teach that God is exponentially more angry than He is loving, and that He can't wait until we take one wrong step so He can unleash His fury upon us.

I find that teaching utterly contradicts the work Christ accomplished on the cross, and the love He demonstrated to us.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **John 3:16**

God loves mankind, and desperately wants us to return to Him.

⁹The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. **2 Peter 3:9**

A word about doomsayers

There seems to be an increasing wave of prophetic declarations spoken these days about God's judgement coming upon Nations. I don't necessarily have an issue with the prophecies per-se but I do struggle with many of the doom-propheesiers. Let me explain.

It is extremely easy to grieve at the sin in the world today, and for that grief to evolve into frustration and eventually into anger towards those that are doing the sinning (trust me, I've been guilty of this myself). Many prophecies are then given out of an attitude of anger and not compassion – which sends the wrong message completely, and strengthens the thinking that God is so vindictive He's looking for any excuse to wipe us out.

¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. **1 Corinthians 13:1-2**

Perhaps we should be silent and pray, if we can't be vocal and love.

*A church was looking for a pastor, so they invited several candidates to come and preach for them. One minister spoke on the text, 'The wicked shall be thrown into hell.' The head elder was not in favour of him. A few weeks later, another preacher came and used the same Scripture for his sermon. This time the head elder said, 'He's good! Let's call him.' The other board members were surprised, and one of them asked, 'Why did you like him? He used the same text as the other minister.' 'True,' replied the head elder, 'but when the second man emphasised that the lost would be thrown into hell, he said it with tears in his eyes and with concern in his voice. The first preacher almost seemed to gloat over it.'*²

Judgement facts:

1. Christians are way too simplistic when dealing with heavy issues

A common fault with us Christians is that when catastrophe strikes, we are all too quick to jump to conclusions, and give oversimplified pat-answers to some very heavy issues.

For example, we must be careful not to quickly label every tragic event as God's judgment because if we conclude that the Christchurch earthquake was God's judgment, then we must conclude that the Pike River Mine tragedyⁱ was also God's judgment... and the 6 Christian teens who drowned while crossing a swollen river at Tongariro National Parkⁱⁱ was God's judgment... and my son breaking his thumb last week was God's judgment.

Where does it stop?

2. Natural disasters are, well... natural

Natural disasters happen. They are a natural occurrence on planet Earth. Tornadoes occur when two masses of different temperatures and humidity meet. Tropical cyclones rage due to the warm, moist air over the ocean rising up causing ferocious wind up draughts. Earthquakes occur when fault lines move... It really is a miracle there aren't more disasters!

3. The earth is dying

We know that all of creation underwent a curse as a result of man's sin, and the first man brought death, sin, and disease into creation, not just to mankind. The earth is dying and we all know that dying things break down. It should really be no surprise.

4. If you live in a disaster-prone area, you'll probably experience a disaster

Is it God's fault if we build on a fault-lines and earthquakes destroy our cities? Should we blame God if we build below sea-level and a storm floods our cities? I really don't think so.

5. We may be living in the last days

³As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" ⁴And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. ⁵For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. ⁶And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. ⁹"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. ¹⁰And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹²And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³But the one who endures to the

ⁱ 29 men died when a New Zealand mine exploded on 19th November, 2010.

ⁱⁱ 6 students and one teacher from Elim Christian College (Auckland, NZ) died while canyoning on Tuesday April 15, 2008.

end will be saved. ¹⁴And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. **Matthew 24:3-14**

Jesus talked very specifically about “end-time” events, events that show us that we live in a time which fits the Biblical description of the “last days” perfectly. A characteristic of the last days will be an increase in disasters. I’m not suggesting that the end of the world will happen tomorrow, but I am saying that we can’t rule that possibility out completely and as we draw closer to the last page, natural disasters will increase.

6. God doesn’t fit well inside a box

Over time, we tend to form our own opinions as to how we think God works. The problem is that when God chooses to work outside of our mind-set (or the box that we have conveniently created for Him), we tend to reject His workings, rather than change our thinking. The classic example of this is the religious leaders rejecting Jesus Christ because He didn’t fit inside their self-made Messiah-shaped box.

Also, consider Job’s three comforters. They did not waver from their belief that Job must have sinned to incite God’s punishment. They believed that God always rewarded good and punished evil, with no exceptions allowed. Little did they know that Job was at the centre of heaven’s wager between Satan and God. They had absolutely no idea what was really going on!

7. God is a God of wrath and love

²²Note then the kindness and the severity of God... **Romans 11:22a**

We must remember that God is not one or the other... He is a God of both wrath and love! Scriptures proving this are too numerous to mention, so I will give only two examples from the book of Romans:

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. **Romans 1:18**

⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. **Romans 5:8**

The problem we have with the concept of a God of wrath is in our understanding of the word ‘wrath’. We naturally think of ‘wrath’ as being uncontrollable anger and revenge, when in reality it is the exact opposite.

The Greek word for wrath is “Orgei” (or-gay) which Aristotle accurately defined to mean:

“Desire mixed with grief”

God looks at the abhorrence of sin but also shows a longing that is mixed with grief for those who live in sin. Once again, God loves mankind, and desperately wants us to return to Him!

⁹The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. **2 Peter 3:9**

8. God loves us too much to ignore us.

A parent who chooses not to give correction and discipline to an unruly child, and who fails to warn the child when he/she is engaging in potentially harmful activity or play is, in my opinion, not a loving parent.

God has given us all free-will which He will not violate, but In His love and mercy He will give us wake-up calls, and some very loud ones if need be to wake us up and shake us out of our complacency.

A Christian’s response:

1. We are all called to intercession

Interceding is when we pray on behalf of someone else. Intercession can and does avert things in the natural, such as disasters.

Consider Israel's corruption and impeding judgement and God's heart toward her...

²⁷Her [Israel's] princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain. ²⁸And her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord God,' when the Lord has not spoken. ²⁹The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery. They have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without justice. ³⁰And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none." **Ezekiel 22:27-30**

It is very interesting to note that someone who chooses to intercede stands in the breach 'for the land'.

2. Have we built on rock or sand?

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." **Matthew 7:24-27**

When the storms of life happen (literally and figuratively), only the genuine Christian will stand. Many people have the outward appearance of being men and women of faith, but in times of shaking, what is on the inside, will show.

"A faith that can be destroyed by suffering is not faith." **Richard Wurmbrand**

3. We have been chosen for this time

¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. **Ephesians 2:10**

¹¹For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. **Jeremiah 29:11**

God could have chosen that we were born in any era from the creation of the world until now, but in His infinite wisdom and fore-knowledge, has created us for this time. God knows what He is doing and the generation we live in needs us! As Christians we need to stand strong and have a visible faith, especially during times of uncertainty, because people around us desperately need hope and help!

4. Fear not!

I find the recent prophecy given by Lance Lambert, renowned Bible teacher (Sunday 18th April 2010, in Jerusalem, Israel), extremely relevant in relation to the recent climactic events, not just in New Zealand, but globally. Below are some excerpts...

"Do not fear neither be dismayed for that which is coming upon the face of the earth, for I am with you, says The Lord. ...Trust Me! I am shaking all things so that which cannot be shaken may remain. When all your circumstances become abnormal, discover in Me your peace, your rest and your fulfilment. ...I know your weakness and your tendency to fear, but do not be dismayed at these things. In the midst of all this shaking, this turmoil and strife, there are two peoples that lie at its' heart, the true and living church and Israel. I will use these matters, these events, to purify one and to save the other! Do not fear, above the storms, the shaking, and the conflict, I am the Everlasting and Almighty One. In Me you cannot be shaken, you can only lose what is not worth holding!"³

Fear is a natural response in times of calamity, but God is exhorting us not to fear as...

"In Me you cannot be shaken, you can only lose what is not worth holding!"

Conclusion

For those people who have asked my personal opinion concerning the Christchurch tragedy...

- **Was the earthquake God's judgement on Christchurch?**

I don't think so – but regardless of the question, it definitely serves as a wake up call for New Zealand.

- **Why didn't God stop the earthquake?**

I simply don't know. Something to consider though: How do we know He isn't stopping other natural disasters from happening all the time?

- **Can any good come out of the earthquake?**

Definitely. Although at times like this, when we cannot understand, we can always trust God's unchangeable character... that He is good, and that He works all things out for good to those who love Him.

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

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References:

- ¹ Adapted from paragraph from: <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/01/14/does-god-hate-haiti>
- ² Moody's Anecdotes, p. 123
- ³ <http://www.lancelambert.org/prophetic6.html>