

The God of Disasters

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MICAH 2:1-3, 6-7, 11

Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance. Therefore, the LORD says: "I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves. You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity."

"Do not prophesy," their prophets say. "Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us." Should it be said, O house of Jacob: "Is the Spirit of the LORD angry? Does he do such things?" If a liar and deceiver comes and says, 'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,' he would be just the prophet for this people!"

Small disasters happen every day. Major disasters are not as frequent, but it seems that there are still several of them every year. An accident might maim and kill several people. A forest fire might leave hundreds homeless. Natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis can destroy thousands. And some wars have killed many more.

Men have always been interested in relating these events to what they think they know about God and what they think they know about themselves, and to do it in a way that is consistent with their own belief systems. Many people's belief systems are not equipped to handle catastrophes, and so to them they appear random, senseless, and beyond explanation. Some people resort to pragmatism, focusing on picking up the pieces; others are driven to cynicism and despair.

But whether or not they come up with their own explanations, or whether their explanations agree with one another, they are united in condemning those who would say that these catastrophes are God's punishments against sinners – those who worship idols, blaspheme, murder, fornicate, cheat, oppress, those who are lovers of themselves rather than lovers of God, and those who would expel him from their courts and schools and families.

No, it is not that they can prove these people's innocence, or that they can prove that God does not punish, but the mere suggestion that God would visit them with judgment, and in wars, and floods, and fires that at times would kill thousands, is enough to invite their anathema. Anyone who dares to suggest that a disaster could be God's legitimate recompense upon deserving evildoers is reviled as cruel, unpatriotic, or the like. It is noteworthy that these individuals – who refuse to believe that *any* natural or "man-made" disaster is caused by God as judgment against the victims and as warning toward all others – include both non-Christians and professing Christians.

Among other things, the biblical prophets were divinely inspired forecasters and interpreters of providence. They would declare to the people what God was going to do and why he was going to do it. And after something had happened, they could offer an authoritative interpretation of how the event fit into the plan of God.

They were enabled by the Spirit to infallibly "read" providence. Without this divine inspiration, it would be dangerous for us to attempt the same. This does not mean that we can have no knowledge about God's intentions and purposes, but we must not go beyond revelation into speculation. On the other hand, this also means that as long as we stay within what is revealed in Scripture, it is possible for us to arrive at some general interpretations of what God is doing in the world and in our lives.

Scripture tells us that God does punish sinners with both natural and "man-made" disasters, from the everyday mishaps and inconveniences to things like floods, earthquakes, plagues, famines, blizzards, and so on. All these things occur by God's sovereign decree and power.

Some of these things involve human decisions and actions, and so we distinguish between natural and "man-made" disasters. This is not to attribute any freedom to humans in these events, as if they can do anything without God's direct, active, and constant power, propelling them to think and perform whatever he has decreed, but it is to emphasize that God controls both nature and man, so that even these so-called "man-made" disasters are planned and caused by God. These would include things like wars, terrorism, and genocide. The disasters are "man-made" only in a relative sense. Thus for our purpose, the distinction is not strictly necessary. The point is that God is the direct sovereign and righteous cause of all disasters of all kinds.

From this biblical teaching, we can then form general interpretations of the various acts of providence, including natural and "man-made" disasters. And we have warrant from Scripture to say that when disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, and even terrorist attacks occur, killing thousands of people, there is *almost* always an element of divine punishment. To speak plainly, God kills these people because they are sinners and they deserve to die, and the time is ripe to punish them. Is not this the scriptural teaching? If you reject this, you might as well stop calling yourself a Christian, for your faith rests in yourself and your own opinions, and it is evident that you have no regard for God and Scripture. Then, another intended effect of these disasters is to awaken the elect and to harden the reprobates.

The human element complicates the issue, although not for those who read and affirm Scripture, and who do not become so indignant over the teaching that they can no longer think clearly. What complicates the issue for some is that the very people that God uses to punish sinners are often just as wicked themselves. Scripture has addressed this in numerous places. When God uses the wicked to punish the guilty, he also plans to punish these instruments of his providence at a later time. In fact, God moves them to perform

additional acts of wickedness in order to fulfill his own divine decree, which is to cause them to incur even greater wrath against themselves.

This had been demonstrated at various times in Israel's history. When God's people fell into sin and idolatry, he would send foreign nations to slaughter and enslave them. But these invaders were themselves subject to God's wrath, and it is precisely because they slaughtered and enslaved God's people (propelled by God's power) that divine judgment soon visited them as well. Consider Israel at the time of Christ. The Son of God came and the Jews murdered him, and said, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25). God held them to their word. Within a generation, the Romans sacked and burned Jerusalem, and completely devastated it. But God saw to it that the Romans themselves were soon destroyed as well. This is the pattern of providence.

Just to mention this is considered anti-Semitic by many people, but they are hypocrites. Let the Jews first answer for the murder of Christ and the thousands of Christians who perished at the beginning of the Church, and then we can talk about anti-Semitism. The truth is that these disasters were the works of God, and to adopt the mentality that the victims were always innocent is to show that they still have not learned from their own history. As in Micah's day, they are still saying, "Disgrace will not overtake us. Is the Spirit of the Lord angry? Does he do such things?" But unless they repent and believe the gospel, a thousand holocausts would not even approach the kind of suffering that they will experience after this life. Of course this is not true just for the Jews, but for all people everywhere.

So it is true that we can read providence in a general way from the information that Scripture gives us. But we must make sure that we really know what the Scripture teaches and refrain from going beyond what it says in our interpretation. To illustrate, Job's friends, who tried to comfort him, ended up confusing and even slandering his character, for they misinterpreted why disaster had befallen Job. The Bible does not say that disasters *always* occur as divine punishments or because the victims have sinned. Recall John 9, where Jesus and his disciples came across a man blind from birth. The disciples betrayed their assumption when they asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

That said, this does not force us back to total agnosticism regarding the meanings and purposes of God's acts of providence. The principles are there in Scripture, only that Job's friends and Jesus' disciples assumed too much and made a false application of them. Yes, we must avoid making overly specific judgments about why something happened, for even if we are partly correct, God can have a number of reasons for doing a certain thing, and not only the one that you have in mind.

On the other hand, those who insist that a certain disaster in which many have perished did not occur as God's judgment is committing the same error, only in the opposite direction. They are claiming to know the mind of God beyond what is stated in Scripture. As for those who reject the very idea that God will punish people with natural and "man-

made" disasters, and kill thousands of people in the process, their problem is that they do not believe the Scripture at all, and so they must be opposed and refuted from this angle. It is one thing to debate whether a particular disaster is God's judgment, in what sense it is God's judgment, or whether God's judgment is its main reason, but to rule it out in principle is pure prejudice.

The Bible repeatedly denounces as false prophets those who offered false comfort. These are they who preached, "Peace, peace," when there was no peace (Jeremiah 6:14). They predicted prosperity when disaster was at the door. God condemned them because "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious" (Jeremiah 6:14). On the other hand, the true prophets of God who received their messages from him understood that "There is no peace for the wicked" (Isaiah 57:21). They announced judgment to those who had sinned.

Consider the recent major natural and "man-made" disasters that happened in various parts of the globe. To put it mildly, none of the affected peoples and regions represented the very picture of Christian holiness. Without a personal revelation from God, we cannot claim to know the divine mind when it comes to the specific reasons and purposes for these events. However, we can be as specific as a deduction from scriptural principles would permit. On this basis, the least we can say is that no one should be astonished at the idea that God caused these disasters to kill some of these people as judgment against them, and as a warning against those associated with them.

Perhaps some would agree that the victims of these disasters were sinners who deserved what happened to them. They were idolaters, fornicators, cheaters, oppressors, and the lovers of self and wealth rather than lovers of God. However, it might seem to these people that to admit this about them would be to add insult to injury, and to scorn the very memory of them. While I understand this perspective, I do not sympathize, for this reaction exalts man to the point that it would honor those who oppose God, rather than to take warning from their demise.

Instead, where disaster strikes, we should say, "These people were idolatrous, covetous, riotous, and wicked to the core. Although God might have other reasons for it, this appears to be God's judgment against them, to punish them and to warn others. I fear that I am not ready to meet God at this time. If I had been one of these people who died, I might be suffering in hell by now. If disaster strikes and destroys me today, I fear that God would cast me away from his presence to be tortured by hellfire forever. I must repent. This cannot wait any longer. I must get right with God now."

It should also make us think about others in the same way, so that we would say to them, "Friend, you are not ready to meet God. Disaster might strike today, or your life might be snatched away tomorrow. Your life is but a vapor. Repent! Repent! Repent while there is still a little time. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Forsake your sins. Destroy your idols. Call upon him to save you from this perverse generation." Yes, mourn for the victims, even honor their memory on a human level, but do not make them into saints and heroes

if they were sinners and criminals. Rather, be warned that "unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Reprobates do not react this way, but disasters make them even more obstinate. They assure one another that the victims were innocent and honorable, and that they were wholly undeserving of what happened to them. They consider it impossible that God would judge in such a fashion, or that God would judge *them* in such a fashion. And if these disasters indeed come from God, then he is to be denounced and cursed as an unrighteous and unworthy deity.

So that there is no misunderstanding, the biblical perspective does not prevent us from offering practical assistance to the surviving victims. That is, even if they had been the objects of God's judgment, Scripture teaches us to show practical benevolence even to our enemies. It is up to God to punish them for their sins, to the extent that he chooses, and at the time of his choosing. Our duty is to obey the relevant biblical precepts on how to treat people. And of course, it is even more important for us to preach the gospel to them, and to tell them that only Jesus Christ can deliver them from the greater wrath to come.

Those who deny the very possibility that these disasters come as God's judgment against the wicked do so based on several beliefs and assumptions that subvert a proper understanding of biblical dogmatics. Some of them seem to think that people are basically good and decent individuals, far from deserving the grisly deaths that they suffered. Then, some people speak as if God will not judge them just because they are Americans. The Israelites came under a similar delusion.

In any case, if the average man on the street is innocent and undeserving of God's harsh judgment, then the gospel is unnecessary for most people. But Scripture teaches that everyone has sinned against God and transgressed his laws, so that everyone deserves death and destruction. Once we affirm this, then there is no reason to be shocked when God pours out his wrath upon a group of people, even killing thousands of them all at once. Rather, it is to be expected.

Those who reject the very possibility that natural and "man-made" disasters can come as divine judgment against the victims not only contradict the biblical doctrine of human depravity, but they also represent God as someone who would not judge and punish in such a fashion. At times, even professing Christians are stunned by what happens, and wonder why God would "allow" such things to happen. But this shows that they have never taken seriously the historical accounts in the Bible concerning the great flood at the time of Noah, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the plagues of Egypt.

God has always judged sinners through natural and "man-made" disasters, killing thousands of them at a time. This is wholly consistent with his holy and just nature. There is no problem with this other than the fact that many people do not want to believe the truth about God and about themselves. In denying that God is the God of disasters, they assure people that he can be ignored and even mocked with impunity. But this universe is

not a democracy, and you cannot democratize or Americanize the kingdom of heaven. You have no rights that would require God to treat you a certain way. With God there is no freedom of religion, no freedom of speech, no freedom of thought – if you believe the wrong thing, say the wrong thing, or even think the wrong thing, God will take it into account and punish you for it, that is, unless you have been saved from his wrath through Jesus Christ.

"This makes God a tyrant," you say. But is God unrighteous unless he conforms to your political theory? This objection itself is evidence of human depravity, and shows that mankind deserves the harshest possible divine punishments. And who says that God cannot be a tyrant? The first definition of a tyrant does not carry the negative connotations often associated with the word, but it is simply "an absolute ruler unrestrained by law or constitution" (*Merriam-Webster*). No sinful man deserves so much power, but the true God can have no less.

Some professing Christians resist the biblical doctrine of divine sovereignty with this objection, that it makes God a tyrant. The implication is that, either they refuse to have a God who is "an absolute ruler," or they take it for granted that a God who uses his absolute power in a way that displeases them has abused his power. Either way, their reaction makes them rebels against the Most High rather than his submissive children. The more urgent problem is therefore not whether God is appropriately called a tyrant, but whether these people are Christians at all. If they are true Christians that are merely confused, then let them make the correction at once.

The truth is that God does not merely "allow" disasters, as if anything in creation has the power to initiate its own changes and motions. But according to our text, just as sinners "plan iniquity" and "plot evil on their beds," so God declares, "I am planning disaster against this people." Just as sinners actively rather than passively plan and perform evil, God actively plans and then causes disasters to arise against them.

Not only does he plan and work disasters against sinners, but he wants people to know that he is the one who performs all these things, and so he sends his prophets to announce judgment. Those who deny that God plans and works disasters against people, including those who have died in recent natural and "man-made" catastrophes, thus obscure the biblical teachings on God, man, sin, providence, judgment, and repentance. Accepting such a position, therefore, would deal a fatal blow to a proper and coherent understanding of biblical dogmatics. It blunts the sword of the Spirit, and diminishes the power and the urgency in the preaching of the gospel.

Besides compromising biblical dogmatics, and indeed *because* it compromises biblical dogmatics, this perspective that denies the very possibility that God would judge men in such a fashion – that is, with natural and "man-made" disasters – also threatens the effective practice of biblical apologetics. It speaks as if God either does not possess or does not exercise constant control over his own creation. Does nature run itself? But how? And by what power? Or, it is asserted that natural disasters happen because our sins

have corrupted nature itself. This is true in a sense, but it does not answer the question. We cannot make even one hair white or black, and now our sins are causing earthquakes?

On the contrary, the biblical teaching gives a clear and certain sound, a coherent explanation, and a compelling call to faith and repentance. It is God who constantly sustains and controls all of creation, whether nature, animals, men, or angels. Our sins have indeed corrupted the creation, but this could happen only because God had decided that these changes in creation should happen in correspondence to our sins. He is the one who sustains and enforces this relationship.

Of course, God is the one who decreed our sins in the first place, but right now we are considering the relationship between our sins and nature. God said to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field" (Genesis 3:17-18). It is not as if Adam cursed the ground himself, for he could not have produced thorns and thistles even if he tried. But Adam's sin affected the earth not because there was a necessary or inherent relationship between the two, but because God established such a relationship in his divine mind, and then *he cursed* the ground subsequent to Adam's sin. Sin is punished only because God punishes sin, but sin does not possess omnipotence – it cannot control nature, and still less can it create hell and send itself there.

The biblical perspective is consistent and convicting. It boldly confesses that it is God who does all these things. So when we are asked, "Where was God when this happened?" (it is a shame that even professing Christians ask it, often with deep resentment), we should never say that "God had to permit it" or even "God could not prevent it." Rather, without embarrassment we will say that God planned it all along, and when it happened, he was right there causing it, performing all his pleasure, and for his own good reasons and purposes. Where was God when it happened? He was there making it happen, for the glory of his name and the good of his elect. And if he was not there, it could never have happened.

This biblical answer will doubtless provoke rage and confusion, but the difference is that it is true – it is biblical and defensible. We can then proceed to expound to our hearers the sovereignty of God, the depravity of man, and salvation through Christ. The elect will soften and turn to God in faith and reverence. The reprobates will harden and curse this God who demands obedience and who punishes wickedness. In this manner, the words and the acts of God divide humanity in two. Those whom God has chosen will accept God the way he is, and worship him for his sovereignty and righteousness. Others will prefer a God of their own imagination, and for this they will be condemned.

If you knew a non-Christian who had died in one of the great disasters of recent years – someone who was killed by warfare, by terrorism, by flood, or by fire – do not weep for him because of how he died, but weep for him because of what he is suffering now. This person might be your father or mother, your brother or sister, your son or daughter, your spouse, or a friend. At this very moment in hell, he is screaming in extreme agony, and

being tortured by an unearthly pain. He curses God, but God laughs at him. He begs God to release him, but God only increases his suffering. He calls out your name, but you cannot hear him, you cannot help him. He recalls the times when the two of you made fun of the Christians and mocked their God. He thinks about the time when one of them stumped him in a debate, but he hardened his heart even more.

He remembers how he was encouraged in his unbelief when he read a certain novel that portrayed Christian history as just one great conspiracy. Now he realizes that all it contained were old theories that were refuted long ago. One of the newcomers in hell had told him that they even made it into a movie. The devil overheard and chuckled, "Could you people be any more gullible? You claimed to be so rational and so knowledgeable, so advanced...Ha! And you were fooled by a novel? Well, you will meet the author in a just a few years. You can get his autograph then!"

No matter how he died, or what kind of person you thought he was, if he died a non-Christian, then he is now in hell – burning, burning, burning! Combine all the mental distress that you have ever suffered and all the physical agony that you have ever endured, multiply its intensity by a million times, and extend its duration to endless eternity, and you will have a faint idea of what he is going through right now. But our imagination fails us, for anything that we can imagine is far weaker than what God is now doing to your friend or relative. So I will restrain myself, lest my description makes hell sound too pleasant. God does not do a half-baked job at anything – what he promises, he delivers, and when he punishes, he goes all the way.

You think that I am a harsh and insensitive man for saying all of this. Perhaps your loved one also considered the gospel and whoever preached it to him as harsh and insensitive. Now he is in hell, and it is too late for him. He is lost forever. But there is still hope for you. You can still be saved today, if God will give you the grace to say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Flee to Jesus Christ now. Cry out to him, "Lord, save me!" He will give light to your feeble mind, and life to your wretched soul.

Finally, what about the Christians who died? Surely some of the thousands of people who perished were believers. Did God judge them, too? We cannot assert beyond what Scripture reveals, but we can be as specific as the general principles revealed in Scripture would allow. It is possible that some of the Christians were included as God's final act of fatherly discipline toward them, so that although they died with the world, they would not be condemned with the world. Or, perhaps some of them were included because God would use their death to inspire others to faith, reverence, and holiness, and at the same time to harden those whom God had wished to harden. These are just some of the possible reasons that we may deduce from Scripture, and from which we could derive many more. But it would be dangerous to speculate about why God had chosen a specific believer to die in such a manner.

What we know for sure is that these Christians are not complaining right now. They are not screaming in agony or cursing God for how their bodies perished. They are resting in

God's presence, grateful, worshipful, and even jumping for joy! They will no longer suffer pain and sickness, or warfare, terrorism, floods, and fires.

If your loved one had died as a Christian, then know that he now receives abundant comfort and recompense for his labor and suffering. And there is no other place that he would rather be than where he is right now. There is no need to worry about him, or to weep about how he died. By God's grace, he has made it, he has arrived. Now is time to think about the condition of your own soul. Do you have the faith that he had? Have you repented of your sins and believed on Jesus Christ for your salvation as your loved one had done? If so, then you shall see him again, and what a reunion it will be! But if you refuse to repent and believe, then one day God will take your life and throw you into the lake of fire. And you shall be numbered with the murderers, adulterers, homosexuals, slanderers, those who practice witchcraft, those who are the lovers of money and pleasure, and all idolaters and unbelievers.