

Where were you when the big storm hit on Tuesday? I was almost to Echo Lake Park when I heard sirens going off. The rain was blinding. People turned on their flashers. It's an eerie feeling when you find yourself glancing up in the sky, hoping you don't see a funnel cloud. Finally, I was finally able to pull into the lot at Veteran's Terrace to wait it out.

June 2010 was when I remember really fearing because of a natural disaster. But it wasn't for me, it was for my son, Aaron. He was in college and a group decided to go to Guatemala for a missions trip. I had misgivings about it from the beginning but Aaron was an adult. My concern was that it was student led. I wasn't comfortable they had enough experience (**pictures**).

First, there was a sinkhole (**picture**) in Guatemala City that swallowed a three story factory. That was followed by torrential rains and mudslides (**pictures**). The airport was closed. Aaron and his team can't get out of the country. Communication became very difficult. It's not safe in a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country during normal times. It only gets worse during disasters. Finally, a week later, the airport reopened and the team was able to fly out.

Disasters are part of our world. We've had so many hurricanes this season we've run out of letters of the alphabet (**pictures**) and are using Greek letters to name them. Earthquakes in Asia, flash floods in Indonesia, wildfires in California, volcanoes erupting in the Philippines, locusts in Africa (**pictures**) – and that's just 2020. As we continue our series on *Fear*, we want to work through **Fearing the Unthinkable: Disaster**.

We live in a kind of necessary denial. Otherwise we'd go crazy. We move on with our daily lives as if we have guarantees of security that simply aren't possible. We congratulate ourselves for our impressive advances in technology and pretend we've conquered every challenge to life and health.

It's not true. Nature is gorgeous and inspiring—and also monstrous and deadly. If misery loves company, those who fear disaster can live in ecstasy because this fear is everywhere. If you live long enough, you're going to experience disaster. Christianity doesn't promise a safe, free ride. The Bible warns us trials will come. **How are we to handle the fear of disaster?**

**1. Natural disasters are NOT natural.** Insurance companies have a specific terminology when it comes to natural disasters, "*acts of God*." Not acts of nature, but acts of God. That raises some interesting questions. Are natural disasters acts of God or random occurrences? What does the Bible say?

Natural disasters are natural in the sense that they're part of nature. They follow certain patterns, and we can observe them scientifically and draw various conclusions from the data. They're natural to the world the way the world is now, but they aren't natural to the world as God originally created it.

**God created the world good.** Genesis 1:31, "*And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.*" When God completed His creation, He looked at all that He'd made and pronounced it *good*. The world as God created it was perfect, not a world of sin, sickness, death or disasters.

**Sin affected the natural world around us.** What happened? Sin happened. Sin entered the perfect world God created and contaminated it. Sin not only affected our relationship with God and relationships with each other, sin affected our relationship with nature and nature's relationship with us. Natural disasters aren't natural to the world, at least not as God created it.

**Natural disasters are part of God's judgment for sin.** We must be very careful here. While natural disasters are part of God's general judgment, we must not presume to know if they're God's judgment for specific sin.

The Bible is clear that God is in control of the weather at all times. Psalm 148:8 speaks of "*lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do His bidding.*" God is in control of the weather. He's the real "weather man."

So if God is in control, why does He allow natural disasters to inflict so much suffering? Because they're part of God's general judgment for sin. Romans 8:20-22, "*For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.*" Our world is under a curse because of sin. Creation groans under it. It's why there are disasters. They're all part of God's general judgment for sin.

Aren't you glad that God is the one in control of the weather? Why do we pray when a big storm is approaching? We pray for God's mercy, ask Him to protect us, and many times we've seen God answer that prayer. Other times God allows His judgment to go forth. Even then God has a purpose in it all.

**We must not presume that we know that a disaster is God's judgment for a specific sin.** When a disaster strikes, some blunder by pronouncing that the disaster was God's judgment. It happened in 2016 when Hurricane Matthew hit Haiti.

But we don't know and shouldn't speak unless we know. We're not God. Yes, we know from Scripture that God sometimes uses natural disasters as judgment. Ask Jonah about a storm and a big fish (**picture**).

So, while natural disasters are part of God's general judgment for sin, we must not presume to know whether they're God's judgment for a specific sin.

## 2. Disasters come from four sources.

**Some disasters come from our natural world.** Earthquakes and volcanoes occur when the pressures within the earth are released. Weather patterns develop which give rise to drought and flood, blizzards and blistering heat. Most of the worst disasters that have occurred in human history are from the natural world and man was in its path.

No one in Wisconsin is surprised that it snows. If you live in Florida, you shouldn't be surprised by hurricanes. If you build your house in the flood plain, don't be surprised if you get an indoor lake in your living room.

**Some disasters come from sinful mankind.** 17 people were shot in Chicago last Monday (**picture**). Mankind is sinful and God allows a limited amount of freedom in choosing to do evil. God is not the author or cause of evil. His very attributes like righteousness, love, goodness and truth preclude Him from being the origin of the antithesis of His own being. It's God's sovereignty and righteous attributes that restrain evil. His grace and goodness are demonstrated in the stories of those that survived.

Last month a teacher in France was beheaded by Muslims after he showed his students cartoons of Mohammed (**picture**). All crimes are intentional acts of evil, and if it only affects one other person, it is a disaster to them.

Other disasters caused by man are not intentional. There are accidents which occur because of ignorance, mistakes or neglect. Cars crash, ships sink, trains wreck, and fires get out of control.

**Some disasters come from Satan.** The book of Job tells us that the devil has power to bring havoc on man. His power is limited by God, but Satan is the source of some disasters. Satan is the instigator of theft, murder and even a supernatural wind that destroyed the house Job's children were in resulting in their deaths. Satan was the source of Job's physical afflictions.

**Some disasters come from God.** God Himself also brings about disasters. He can strike an individual, a nation, or the whole world. Moses' sister, Miriam, grumbled against Moses and God struck her with leprosy. Egypt refused to let Israel go and God sent 10 plagues to convince Pharaoh (**picture**). Noah's world (**picture**) was so wicked that God sent a flood that wiped it out except for the eight people God preserved on the Ark.

Scripture records case after case where God directly intervenes against man and brings disaster. Since the Scriptures clearly declares the sovereignty of God in all things, we believe that God has control over and limits the disasters that come at the hands of nature, men and Satan.

God still is in the business of intervening into the lives of men in the midst of the various calamities that come. It may come directly from His hand or by His merciful limiting the calamity caused by nature, evil people, or Satan.

## 3. Different people respond differently to disasters.

Fear of disaster can paralyze and immobilize us. Fear in the midst of the storm is instinctive and beneficial. But fear of a storm that *could* happen is not. It's an intrusive emotion that can result in a greatly diminished life.

Imagined fear of disaster can become so vivid that we may have difficulty distinguishing it from reality. It can become so debilitating that we have a tough time sleeping at night, or getting out of bed in the morning. Though the sky is clear, we're devastated by thoughts of storms. It's like the fear William Hughes Mearns (**picture**) expressed in his poem:

*Last night I saw upon the stair  
A little man who wasn't there  
He wasn't there again today  
Oh, how I wish he'd go away.*

Natural disasters leave us with lots of questions about morality and the nature of God. Some rush to judgment on these issues and come to erroneous conclusions. Dr. Albert Mohler (**picture**), President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, outlines some different responses to disaster.

**There is the Atheist's response.** Richard Dawkins (**picture**) suggests that "*Human life is nothing more than a way for selfish genes to multiply and reproduce.*" He believes life is random and meaningless. When applied to natural disasters, the atheist must conclude, "It's just nature, too bad."

**There is the Philosopher's response.** According to Mohler, the philosopher believes "God can be good, or He can be powerful, but He cannot be both." Bible-believers reject this outright. We understand that God is both full of mercy and grace, and unable to be "*tempted by evil*" (James 1:13).

**There is the Legalist's response.** The legalist explains all suffering as a consequence of sin. To be sure, some suffering is a result of moral failure, but we must be careful to not assign all suffering to sin. That's the mistake of the Pharisees in John 9 to the blind man. Natural disasters touch *"the just and the unjust"* alike.

**There is the Liberal Religionist's response.** Liberal theologians rush to answers that prove untrue and make three mistakes. Some blame God and try to assign evil to the hand of God. Others, like the Christian Scientist, diminish God by rejecting the reality of the physical as an illusion. Still others, like Open Theists, doubt God's character by suggesting that God is always ready with Plan B in case Plan A fails. They belittle God's power and omniscience. For example, Lance Wallnau (**picture**) said, *"Sometimes God doesn't get His way."* That's heresy.

**There is the Christian's response.** You can't be a Christian and not believe the Bible. Based on God's Word, the Christian trusts the wisdom and sovereignty of God without making God the author of sin. When facing disaster, the Christ follower has access to the very throne room of heaven.

Hebrews 4:14-16 says, *"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*

The psalmist cried to God. His words indicate a sense of urgency and desperation. True to His Word, God listened and showed mercy over and over again. When there's a disaster we should pray for God's grace and mercy for several groups of people: Those who are hurting personally. Those grieving over the loss of life and livelihood. Those that worry about what to do or where to turn. Those that question and wonder what's happening. Those who lead the recovery efforts and help the hurting.

A great example of a person transforming calamity by his Christlike worldview is David Watson (**picture**). Watson, a pastor in England, died of cancer before these words of his were published. Listen to his words:

*"It's sometimes only through suffering that we begin to listen to God. Our natural pride and self-confidence have to be stripped painfully away and we become aware, perhaps for the first time, of our own personal needs. During the ministry of Jesus on earth, a tower fell in Siloam and killed 18 innocent people. 'Why did God allow it' was the immediate questions pressed by those around Him. Jesus replied, not by answering the question of suffering nor by giving a satisfactory solution to this particular tragedy. Instead, He came back to the practical challenge of God's Word: 'I tell you...unless you repent you will all likewise perish.'*

*It may sound a little bleak, but Jesus was far more concerned with a person's eternal well-being than merely satisfying an intellectual curiosity. Here He was dealing not with the question of 'Why?' but with the question 'What?' 'What is God saying in this calamity?'"*

Watson concludes, *"Through the unexpected diagnosis of cancer I was forced to consider carefully my priorities in life and to make some necessary adjustments. I still do not know why God allowed it, nor does it bother me. But, I am beginning to hear what God is saying, and this has been enormously helpful to me."* **That my friend, is the Christian's response.**

**4. Disaster can bring us to our "wits end."** A group of golfers were approaching the 4<sup>th</sup> hole one afternoon. Suddenly, the sky turned ominous. It began to rain amid claps of thunder. They rushed to shelter in a gazebo near a metal fence. As the storm grew in intensity, a bolt of lightning hit the fence and lit it up like a neon sign. It was a while before any of them could speak.

Finally, one player turned to his opponents and said, "You know what I had on the first hole. It really was a seven." Storms have a way of making us focus on what matters and turning our hearts to God, Psalm 107:23-32:

*Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the Lord, His wondrous works in the deep. For He commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits' end.*

*Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and He brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love, for His wondrous works to the children of man! Let them extol Him in the congregation of the people, and praise Him in the assembly of the elders."*

At some point in our lives, we all end up at *"wit's end."* The fear of disaster can bring us to our "wits end." Here we see a true to life experience. God sends a big storm. Experienced sailors found themselves at "wits end." So, what did they do?

The same thing we do when we find our self in a corner with no way out. They cry out to God to save them. God heard them, stilled the storm and brought them to their desired haven.

Wits end for them was after trying everything they could think of, but they're still in trouble. It's what we do too, isn't it? We try to fix things until it's too late. We're at "wits end." These merchants knew they were in trouble. They were on the "mighty water." They had their sea legs and been in storms before. But these were huge waves, "They mount up to the heavens, they go down again to the depths." No wonder their courage melts. In the storm they can't save themselves. It's a life and death situation.

What makes the difference is what we do when we get there! We must do what they did, "cry out to the Lord." At wits end, there's no mumbling a prayer under your breath. There are no concerns about who might hear you.

The Bible is full of people at wits end who cried out to God. *Why?* Because God has a special promise for those at wits end. Psalm 50:15 "And call on Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor Me."

Did you know hurricanes are necessary to maintain the balance in nature? Tropical storms, with winds up to 150 miles an hour, accompanied by torrential rains and lightning, can be devastating. Yet, scientists tell us they're tremendously valuable. They dissipate a large percentage of the oppressive heat that builds up at the equator. They're indirectly responsible for much of the rainfall in North and South America. Hurricanes actually do more good than harm. And that's true for us, too. Sometimes we need storms to clean up our lives. God is in control of the disasters. Since our Heavenly Father is in control, we don't need to fear the unthinkable. That's because...

**Disasters are meant to turn us to God.** People make two mistakes when it comes to God and natural disasters. Either they blame God when disaster hits, or forget God when disaster passes them by. Some years ago a huge storm was headed for a direct hit on New York City. Many prayed for God to turn that storm back out to sea and God did. Instead of thanking God for His mercy, they're on TV making jokes about how the weather forecasters were wrong. It's a sad commentary of how easily we forget God. So, we must not blame God when disaster hits, and not forget Him when we're spared.

**They're a reminder that this world is passing away.** Even after coming to Christ, we often cling to the temporal things of this world. Disasters remind us this world is passing away. We must hold loosely the things of this world and cling to the eternal things of God instead.

**They're a warning that judgement is coming.** Proverbs 10:25, "When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever." Every disaster is a warning that judgment is coming, where the wicked will be swept away and only the righteous will remain standing.

*Who are the righteous?* The Bible makes it clear that we're all sinners. We can only be declared righteous in God's sight when we put our faith in the gospel, in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross for us. Only those who have put their trust in Christ as Savior will be spared the judgment to come.

Jesus said of the end time: "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains" (Mt. 24:6-8). As we draw closer to Christ's return and the Day of Judgment, there will be an increase in disasters. *Why?* They're the beginning of birth pains and a warning of judgment to come.

**They're a motivation to put your trust in God.** People either forget God when a storm passes them by, or blame God when the storm hits. But God is for you and wants you to turn to him. Ezekiel 33:11, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die?" Many "get religion" in a disaster, but don't really turn to Jesus. They pray, "God, if you will only get me through this, I'll follow you the rest of my life." But a few days later they're back to their old ways. They were just looking for an escape.

What about those who suffer loss in a disaster? Believers aren't exempt from suffering. Does it mean our trust was misplaced? No, as Paul wrote in Romans 8: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing can separate us from God's love.

**They're an opportunity to show God's love to others.** God didn't just say that He loves us. He showed us. He sent His Son to sacrifice Himself for us. Jesus laid down His life for us and we're to be Jesus in this world. Disasters are an opportunity for us to show God's love to others. When disasters hit far away, some help by contributing to relief funds. When it hits near, there are many practical ways to reach out; praying, making personal contact with a neighbor/friend, sharing food and supplies, helping out where there's a need.

**They help us remember what's really important in life.** Matthew 6: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal...Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Disasters help us focus on what's important. If your

house caught on fire, if there was time after everyone was safe to grab a few things, what would you grab? I'd grab the pictures. The other stuff is just stuff. Pictures are our family history, our love for each other and life together.

**Conclusion:** We're foolish to live **Fearing the Unthinkable**. Some level of disaster is inevitable. We must choose to trust God and rest in Him.

In the early 1980's, a retired couple was alarmed by the threat of nuclear war so they undertook a serious study of all of the inhabited places on the globe. Their goal was to find a safe place somewhere they'd least likely to be affected by a nuclear war. They studied, researched and traveled. Finally, they found the place. On Christmas day they sent their preacher a card from their new home...in the Falkland Islands. But their "paradise" soon turned into a war zone in 1982 with the war between Great Britain and Argentina.

It's foolish to **Fear the Unthinkable**. Disaster is inescapable. If you're a believer, your Heavenly Father is in control of even the worst disaster.

Will you trust Him? He's in control. He holds the destiny of the galaxies in His hands, all the while knowing the precise number of the hairs on your head. Above all else, He loves you and chose to pour that love out, not in words but in blood. Let the disasters come. Let the earth itself open beneath us. We find our safety in God alone and He's enough! And we're all going to get Home before dark!