

HOW DO WE RESPOND TO NATURAL DISASTERS?

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Questions rise and emotions race as we watch and listen to reports from Haiti this week. How can this be? Why did this happen? We are overwhelmed with grief and sorrow, and we are left wondering, "What can we do? How should we respond?"

Based on Luke 13:1-5, I want to encourage you this week with four truths we are reminded of as we watch this story in Haiti unfold, and three specific ways we might respond. Luke 13:1-5 says:

There were some present at that very time, who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Two incidents are referred to in this text. In one event, some Galileans were offering sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, and they were killed by Roman troops in an ambush of sorts. The second event refers to a tower in Siloam, which apparently fell unexpectedly and killed eighteen people. As such, this text gives us a picture of both moral and natural evil, moral and natural disasters. When asked to comment on these events, Jesus gave these four sobering reminders.

Natural disasters remind us that death is unpredictable. Jesus underscores the unpredictability of death in both of these circumstances. The people in both events died quickly and unexpectedly, and both groups of people died at places and times when they probably felt the safest (worshiping at the temple and standing next to a tower of defense!). Jesus reminded them that death is often sudden and death is often surprising. These people, much like the victims of the earthquake in Haiti, likely did not wake up that morning thinking about the possibility of their death. In the same way, as we consider this natural disaster, we need to be reminded that none of us is guaranteed tomorrow (or the rest of today). We need to be reminded that our houses and our cars and our bank accounts and our health and our jobs and our comforts in this life do not guarantee us anything. I am convinced the adversary would like nothing more than for us to see the news on TV this week and flip over to the basketball game and think, "That could never happen here." We need to remember that death is unpredictable.

Natural disasters remind us of the penalty of sin, which plagues all of us. The group of people who approached Jesus in this text believed that any sort of tragedy that would come upon someone was due to a particular sin in that person's life. The crowd in Luke 13 virtually assumed that these Galileans or the people crushed by the tower were worse sinners than others. And Jesus reminded them that sin is universal. Jesus reminded them that it was not their place to play God and decide whose sin caused what. Instead, natural disasters should remind us of the penalty of sin – death – which plagues every single one of us. The question is not, "Why did this happen to the people in Haiti?" The question is, "Why has this not happened to me?" But we don't think like this. We think we deserve blessing and prosperity, and that any time of danger or disaster is unfair and calls into question God's goodness, God's power, or maybe even God's existence. In the wake of events like these, people throw all kinds of accusations toward God, but the reality is that the only reason why we are not all cast away from Him at this moment is because His great mercy sustains us. We are sinners, and natural disasters remind us that we all deserve the ultimate penalty of sin, which is death.

Natural disasters remind us to repent and be reconciled to God. This is the main point of Luke 13. Amidst the crowd's question regarding natural disaster, Jesus does not immediately vault into a discussion of the mysterious ways of God. This certainly seemed like a golden opportunity to do so, but He didn't. Instead, Jesus looked at them in their eyes and urged them to repent. In light of the fact that death plagues all of us and is unpredictable in each of our lives, repent. Repent and be reconciled to God. There is no more important question that any one of us could answer after the events in Haiti this week than this question: Are you right with God? If not, repent! Are you toying with sin in your life? Repent! Is your heart cold toward God? Repent! Are you living in willful, deliberate sin? Repent! Have you grown apathetic in your relationship with God? Repent! God is merciful and gracious, and He forgives, saves, cleanses, and restores the repentant heart. Natural disasters remind us to repent and be reconciled to God.

Natural disasters remind us of the urgency of our mission. Right before this episode in Luke 13, we are reminded of the brevity of life. In Luke 12:35-48, Jesus tells us that life is fleeting and people are perishing. Oh, do we realize this? Our lives are fleeting! Your life is fleeting! And people – all around us – are perishing. People in Haiti, people in India where I write this from, people in Birmingham, and people everywhere in between are perishing. Millions upon millions are perishing without the Gospel. Millions upon millions are living in dire physical need. Our lives are fleeting, people are perishing, and eternity is coming. If people do not hear and receive the Gospel, they will perish forever. We cannot sit idly by! We must give ourselves with radical urgency to our mission.

These reminders lead us to three responses in our lives to the earthquake in Haiti.

First, we must pray for the church. We must pray for followers of Christ all across Haiti. We must pray that they would be still and know that He is God. We must pray that they would cling to the One who said that hard-ship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword cannot separate them from the love of Christ. We must pray that God would meet all their needs according to His glorious riches in Christ so that they might reach out and serve those who are needy around them. We must pray that God would display His goodness and His greatness through them in these days so that many would know the mercy and grace of Christ.

Second, we must pray for the lost. Pray for the host of unbelievers in the middle of this tragedy as well as the millions of unbelievers thousands of miles away from this tragedy. Pray that they will discover the grace and goodness of God in all of this. Pray that they will hear the best news in all the world – that there is a Savior who is familiar with all their suffering who has conquered sin and death and brings them the hope of eternal life where there will be no more sorrow, sickness, pain, earthquakes, or any other natural disaster.

Finally, pray for ourselves. To anyone who does not know Christ, repent and be reconciled to God. Not one of us is guaranteed tomorrow. Today is the day of salvation! And to those who do know Christ, give your life with radical urgency to the mission of God. Yes, pray now about how you might give financially through Christ-centered, church-focused organizations that can provide immediate relief. And yes, pray about how in the days to come you and your family and our faith family can be involved in meeting long-term needs in Haiti for the glory of Christ. But then pray and ask God how He wants to spend your life for the spread of His Gospel among all nations. With the spiritual riches we have in Christ and the Gospel, and with the wealth of physical resources He has entrusted to us, let's ask God to use our lives for the sake of urgent spiritual and physical need around the world, and let's ask God to spend our lives for the sake of His glory in Birmingham, in Haiti, and among all peoples. Indeed, this is the most proper response to the earthquake we have witnessed over the last week.