



## ***Member Care Update***

**Ethnê-MC Facilitation Team**

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### ***Ethnê-MC Update Issue 24: January 2011***

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Earthquakes and cholera in Haiti and volcano eruptions, earth quakes and a tsunami in Indonesia are just some of the disaster headlines we've read in the last few weeks. How do we come alongside pastors and other care givers who want to help people deal with crisis after crisis? Do we have clear convictions about our God and disasters—clear enough to be able to express them to hurting people we may be called to help? The following treatise on disasters should help each of us in Member Care define what we believe about God, disasters and trials that seem unexplainable. If we better understand what we believe about our God Who allows disasters, then we will be better positioned to listen well to those who serve on the front lines of crisis. We welcome your responses to the ideas presented here.

Our author this month is Eng Hoe who is married with 3 teenage children. He was a Barrister at Law, Lincoln's Inn, UK and practiced as an advocate and solicitor in Malaysia for 10 years. In 1994 he left his legal practice and spent 5 years waiting on the Lord and learning about the poor. In 1999 he pioneered a crisis relief ministry, training and leading teams from Malaysia, Singapore and people from other nations to crisis situations in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Macedonia/Kosovo, Honduras, Turkey, India, Indonesia, Cambodia, Karen refugees along the Burmese-Thai border, etc.

Eng Hoe now gives training in leadership, strategic planning, crisis response, community development and kingdom transformation. The training has been given in Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, US, Nepal, Cambodia, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Myanmar, China, Africa, etc. and he continues to mentor several leaders he has trained in these nations. He is currently an associate of Partners International, a US based agency, an associate of Starfish International Partnerships and a director of Crisis Response Training & Networks Asia. His passion is for the church to fall in love with Jesus and catch His kingdom vision and His heart for the poor, broken and marginalized, so that they would engage the poor and needy in meaningful ways.

## **Why God Allows Disasters – A Biblical Perspective**

### **Eng Hoe**

This article was originally written after I had returned from the Gujarat earthquake in 2001. The Gujarat earthquake had destroyed possibly between 70% - 90% of immediately hit towns and killed more than 100,000 people. The devastation was so terrible it was hard to believe and comprehend what had happened. I passed through place after place of collapsed buildings, rubble and the stench of dead bodies still buried beneath. It was shocking. Why did this happen? Was it the wrath and judgment of God? Or was it simply the forces of nature at work? In any event, why did God let this happen?

I used to lead teams in response to disasters in various places around the globe. Against that background, someone once asked me, "If you say God is Almighty and Sovereign and everything is within His control, then if God is the One who caused or allowed the disaster to

happen, why are you going there to help them? Why did God not allow the disaster to happen in the first place? Why should He cause or allow the disaster to happen and then send you and your teams there to sort out the mess?”

### **Diverse Beliefs**

Hardliners of a certain religion say that God is sovereign and disasters are the judgment of God against sin. There are adherents of the same religion but with a softer stand, who respond by saying God is sovereign and He does as He pleases and we cannot question why. It could be God's judgment or perhaps not. In any event, we should simply accept it and be humbled by it.

There is another religion that believes we were born to suffer. Suffering, whether it comes through natural disasters or other ways, is simply a part of an ongoing life and death cycle that will purge us and eventually bring us into a state of eternal bliss.

Yet another religion views disasters as the outcome of capricious spirit forces that we must constantly appease or they will unleash their fury on us.

Modern secularism debunks all these, and views disasters simply from a scientific perspective of geological and climate forces at work.

### **Views among Christians**

How are we as Christians to understand disaster? There are those who believe there is no answer and therefore any attempt at answering this question is futile. And there are those who believe we need not know why. God is sovereign and we should simply just trust Him regardless. Job did not need to know why in order to trust Him.

That is a good point. It is wise for us to remember Isa.55:8-9: *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than Your ways and My thoughts higher than your thoughts.”* One of the most simple but profound prayers that anyone can pray is this, “You are God and I am not”. That is basically what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, *“Let God be true and every man a liar.”* (Rom.3:4)

I believe there are times God will not explain why things happen to us for the very reason He wants us to learn to trust Him regardless. In Job13:15, Job concluded that he would trust a God He could not explain. *“Though He slay me; yet will I trust Him.”*

There are other times when God intends to shake us up and wants us to know why. It is tragic when God brings disaster but we do not see or understand and continue in our ways. This was the cry of Isaiah the prophet: *“He humbles those who dwell on high, he lays the lofty city low; he levels it to the ground and casts it down to the dust ... When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness.”* Isa.26:5

*“Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and regard not the majesty of the LORD. O LORD, your hand is lifted high, but they do not see it.”* Isa.26:10-11

### **The Purpose of this Article**

Although the question of “Why disasters?” cannot be comprehensively answered in a few paragraphs, I hope this article will provide the “big picture” or the seed that will lead us to search and seek the Lord to understand it better.

But the purpose of this article is not just to answer that question academically or theologically. As stewards of His Kingdom, I believe it is imperative that we have a clear understanding on disasters and that we understand the times and know where we are now in God's agenda, so we can work with Him in what He is doing in the world today. I believe disasters and suffering are a working out of God's end goal or objective of why He created us in the first place. How

can disasters, which are about destruction and death, be reconciled with creation and life? Like other things in the Bible, this is a paradox that calls for “eyes to see and ears to hear”.

### **Where is God in all of this?**

Is it God? Is it the devil? (“*the thief comes to steal kill and destroy*” Jn. 10:10) Is it man (unrestrained industry and global warming)? Or is it just nature? Or is it a little of each? Or is it because, as many would be quick to say, that wherever a disaster occurs, God is judging the sins of the people? For such questions, as believers of the Bible, we are immediately confronted with the sovereignty of God.

### **God is Sovereign**

Jesus said, “*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without the will of my father in heaven.*” (Matt.10:29) In other words, Jesus said everything that happens in nature is within the sovereign control and will of God. That includes what the devil can do. “*See it is I who created the blacksmith who fans the coals into flame and forges a weapon fit for its work. And it is I who have created the destroyer to work havoc.*” (Isa.54:16)

What then of disasters that destroy lives and property and cause untold suffering for survivors? If God is sovereign, and He could have prevented disasters from happening, why did He not do so? What kind of God is He who would allow this to happen?

It is inescapable. One of the first things that needs to be addressed in seeking answers to the why disasters question, is the nature of God. We cannot understand creation and all things under heaven (including disasters) unless we first understand, or at least seek to understand the Creator. This is especially the case when the Creator tells us that He created us to be like Him. Meaning, we can only understand the purpose for why we exist by seeking to know who God is, and what God is like.

### **The Nature of God**

In the Bible, it is unmistakably clear that God says He is good; He is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. (1Jn.1:5) But He also says that He is Almighty and Sovereign. He works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will. (Eph.1:11) Everything includes the disasters. “*When disaster comes to a city has not the Lord caused it?*” (Amos 3:6) “*The Lord works out everything for His own ends - even the wicked for a day of disaster.*” (Prov.16:4) He is all-wise and His wisdom surpasses our understanding. “*Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed Him as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten Him, and who taught Him the right way? Who was it that taught Him knowledge or showed Him the path of understanding?*” (Isa.40:13-14)

In Rom.9:13-24, the Apostle Paul reminded us, “*Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. It does not therefore depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that My name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” Therefore God has mercy on whom He wants to have mercy, and He hardens whom He wants to harden. One of you will say to me, “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists His will?” But who are you O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me this way?” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show His wrath and make His power known, bore with great patience the objects of His wrath – prepared for destruction? What if He did this to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy, which He prepared in advance for glory.”*

So are we to conclude that God could be capricious - that we can never predict how He may or may not feel about anything at any time and He’ll just do as He pleases? I don’t believe so. I believe God wants us to have a deeper understanding of His nature and why He allows

disasters and suffering. Before we go further, we need to address the question of sin in relation to disasters.

### **Sin and Disasters**

Often Christians jump to the conclusion that when a disaster happens in a place, it must be because the people there must have committed some terrible sins, like Sodom and Gomorrah, or they were somehow more sinful than the average community elsewhere on this planet. Jesus was however very explicit that this was not necessarily the right conclusion to draw. Disasters and suffering happen to victims not necessarily because they are more sinful than others. Jesus told the people that they should not think that those on whom the Tower of Siloam fell were worse sinners than all the other people who lived in Jerusalem. (Lk.13:1-5)

Again, when a person is born blind, it does not mean that he or his parents were sinful. His condition may be totally unrelated to personal sin. (Jn.9:1-3) In Matt.5:45, Jesus said that God makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. The truth is, none of us are ever good enough to deserve God's mercy. It is simply not a question of who are more sinful and therefore suffer more and who are less sinful and suffer less. The truth is we all know so little of the Holiness of God and therefore have very little idea of the horror of sin. We take sin so lightly. Were God to release His full fury and wrath against sin, all of us would be instantly destroyed. We could not last even one second before the Holiness of God. All of us are sinful. Though we may have been Christians for many years and though we may have served the Lord for many years, everyday, we all come before the Lord in the same way we first came – only through the Blood of Jesus. None of us at any time can claim a right to receive more love or mercy from God than others. We need to ask not only why a disaster has happened in a certain place, we also need to look at all the peace and calm in all the other places on the earth and ask "Why?" The bottom line is this - the whole world continues to exist only because of God's mercy.

### **Disasters - the Direct Judgment of God**

Though Jesus Himself warns us against over-simplistic conclusions, it is also clear from the Scriptures that there are times when God brings disaster on a people as judgment upon them for their sins. When man sins, he brings about a curse and the potential for two things to happen at the same time – it gives ground to the enemy to kill, steal and destroy, and it brings on God's judgment. Read Ps.78:49, Eph.4:27, Ezek.14:12-20, Deut.28:15-68, Jer.4:16-18, Lev.26:14-39, Amos 3:6, Gen.6:5-13. The flood, Sodom and Gomorrah and the plagues on Egypt in the book of Exodus are such instances. Also included are the end time disasters as foretold in Revelations.

I know of a case in recent history where thousands of religious leaders had gathered in a place to discuss and plan how to wipe Christianity off the map of their nation. During the conference, thousands of these religious leaders were killed by an 8.2 earthquake. The town where they held the conference was at the epicenter of the earthquake.

### **The Redemptive Purposes of Disasters – the "Kairos" Intervention of God into a Community**

There are other instances in scripture however, where God may directly cause or indirectly allow disasters to intentionally bring those who survive to repentance. (2Chron.7:13-14, Lev.26:14-45, 2 Peter 3:9. Isa.26:5) God used the Persian and Babylonian armies on Israel, to punish but also to purge them and get a remnant that will turn their hearts to Him.

Usually when things are going well for people, they see no reason or need to seek God. There is no spiritual hunger. The average man is quite content and self-sufficient. He has learned to make life work for him without the need for God. Whole communities and nations have set up religious, political, cultural, social and economic structures that enable people to exist and thrive without God. These structures are the foundations upon which communities and nations rest and build upon and which convince people our message is unnecessary and irrelevant. To the extent these structures function, they become barriers to the Gospel.

What happens when disasters strike? These structures are broken down and dismantled. The belief systems and foundations of people are shaken or destroyed. People are by force of circumstances brought to their knees and brought to the place where these structures they depended on, are no longer dependable. God does not desire for any to perish, but there may be times in His wisdom and in His mercy when He expresses His wrath in the form of natural disasters so this misplaced dependence can be broken. Otherwise, communities would continue in their blindness and bondage to death.

Three times in Romans chapter one it says, *"God gave them over"* to their sins, depravity, etc. When God leaves a people alone, it is not good news, because people will inevitably head towards self destruction. It is the mercy of God that He keeps the universe in order and maintains some sanity in this world. But when God intervenes, there is an opportunity for people to come to know His love. God's wrath then, is really also His mercy. Disasters become God's "kairos" intervention into communities and unreached peoples so the Gospel of His love may penetrate through all these barriers and communities and nations may turn to Him.

When disasters strike at a community, metaphorically speaking, God is tilling the soil and breaking up hard ground for seeds to be sown. Disasters may kill thousands and cause untold suffering, but they also provide the opportunity for a new generation of people to come to know and experience His love. From God's perspective, no amount of loss can be compared to the value of one soul that turns to Him.

A broad sweep of God's dealings with Israel in the Old Testament, through exile and restoration also shows He uses crises and disasters to purge, purify and extract for Himself a remnant of those who worship and love Him. (Isa.6:9-13) I believe that the end time crises and disasters foretold by Jesus in Matt.24 will have the same effect of producing a remnant on earth of those who will turn to Him and be purged. (Mal.3:2-4) God uses crises and disasters to destroy everything that is man made so that only that which is of Him will remain. (Heb.12:26 and Rev.11:15) It must also be remembered what Jesus said when He prophesied in Matt.24:14, *"The gospel of this kingdom will be preached to all nations as a witness and then the end shall come."* This prophecy was spoken in the context of crises and disasters. I believe God is going to send or allow disasters in the end times, both to judge as well as to push nations and man up against the wall to confront people with the question of who God is.

There were people of a very resistant religion who in the tsunami cried out to Jesus to save them as they saw the wave coming. Truly, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (Pr.9:10) In the end times, although there will be many who will harden their hearts (Rev.9:20-21, 16:9-11), there will be those who will fear the Lord and turn to Him. *"I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* (Acts 2:19-21)

As the time nears for this world to end, God will withdraw His hand of mercy and grace and allow us the full consequences of our choices, and He will mete out His judgment for the choices we make. I believe we are near the end and we are already beginning to see that happening. We will increasingly see the breakdown and collapse of everything God did not build. Every man-made system and institution will collapse. Every kingdom will fall. Everything will be exposed for what it is. God will remove His hand that has been holding things together and shake everything that can be shaken so that only what cannot be shaken, what He made and what He built, will remain (Heb.12:27) In the end, only His kingdom will remain. (Rev.11:15) Hopefully, in the process, people will awaken and return to the Lord, or get serious with God. (2 Peter 3)

### **The Origin and Purpose of Suffering**

"Why disasters?" is related to the question, "Why suffering?" Every suffering can be traced back to the fall of man through human choice. (Gen.2:17, Rom.5:12) Adam sinned against God. He chose to be independent of God. Because all of creation was put under his dominion, when the curse came upon him, it came upon the whole of creation too – all that were under Adam's

domain. (Gen.1:26, Ps.8:4-6, Gen3:17-19) From that time on, the earth has been on a downhill decline. Arguably, all of the natural disasters have been as a result of what happened in the very beginning. But behind the whole thing, God is the Author of all, working out His sovereign and eternal purposes, even in subjecting His very own creation to frustration, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay. *“For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay ...”* Rom.8:20-21.

In what way did God subject His own creation to frustration? He put the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden knowing full well what would follow. God is love. He created us to love and be loved. Love must necessarily involve choice. For us to choose Him, He first had to let us go, so that when we return to Him, He can then say; “Now you are really mine.” There was no other way. It would not have been love, and man would not have the opportunity to learn to love, if God had kept man in a utopia-like Garden of Eden. Paul was clear enough on this in 1 Cor.13. We now live in the imperfect and it is through the trials and difficulties, the partial knowledge, and struggles of life that we learn to love. God’s intention for pain and suffering to develop character in us was in fact designed and embedded into the very core of His creation from the very beginning. When He put the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden, He did it purposely to set the stage for His end goal to be fulfilled.

When man chose to take the fruit from that tree, he brought a curse upon all that God had put him in dominion over, and he set in motion forces that would increase to the total destruction of mankind and earth (end-time disasters). From one perspective it is the wrath of God. But from another, it is really our reaping what we have been sowing (this includes the effects of unrestrained industry, pollution and global warming). There is a law of increase (a seed produces a forest) in operation throughout history, and as mentioned previously, it is in fact the mercy of God that has been restraining the full effects of sin. Were it not the mercy of God that somehow has held things together, the power of sin would have destroyed us long ago. But from yet another perspective it is actually God sovereignly working out His overarching purposes (Rom.9-11). God does not wring His hands in glee whenever the effects of sin (whether ours or someone else’s) take their toll on us, but He does stand back and not intervene at times to let it achieve His ultimate purpose – which is to test us and hopefully push us back to Him. Even more, He desires that trials will mold us to become like Him, the reason for why he created us in the first place.

We have been made in the likeness of God, but we are obviously so very, very far from the fullness of what that means. But God has a plan for how He will mold and shape us to be like Him. The Bible refers to that process by different terms: “bringing many sons to glory” (Heb.2:10), “to be conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Rom.8:29), “purify for Himself a people that are His very own” (Titus 2:14). The apostle Paul was clear especially from Romans chapters 8 – 11 and elsewhere in his epistles, that God’s plan from the very beginning was that God Himself subjected us to sin not only in order that He would show His mercy and love for us, but also with the purpose that through all the sin and decay of this world we would be put through a process of purging, refining and molding and through it become overcomers of sin and death and become like Jesus.

*“Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”* Rom.8:17-21

*“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”* Rom.8:29

*“... to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory” Rom.9:23*

*“For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.” Rom.11:32*

There are other passages in the Bible that make the same point. God takes us through the process of purging, refining and molding of our character through trials, difficulties and suffering. The writer of Hebrews calls it God's discipline. God's ultimate aim is to mold our character so we may share in His holiness. (Heb.12:10) Sharing in His holiness means being set apart to be His – to be like Him and enjoy communion with Him. We however cannot be one with Him and enjoy communion with Him unless we know His heart and His character. It is through trials and suffering that we are broken and become less and less, and He becomes more and more. Suffering is evidence of His love for us as His children.

*“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as son. My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Heb. 12:4-12*

Possibly the most misinterpreted verse in the whole Bible is Romans8:28. *“We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose”*. The “good” in this verse is usually understood from the human perspective; not God's perspective. We think that God will somehow work everything out in our favor and everything will be alright. But Paul is actually saying the very opposite. The “all things” Paul is referring to is suffering, and the “good” is explained in verse 29 – that we would through the suffering be molded to become like Jesus – God's highest purpose for us. Rom.8:28 must be read in its context which begins from verses 17 – 39.

That's why from verse 31 – 39 Paul says that no matter how bad it gets, no matter how condemned and abandoned we feel, and even though God does not deliver us, he is nevertheless convinced that God's love for us is not diminished one bit. Instead it is through the suffering that we are molded to become overcomers and conquerors. *“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." 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.”*

Paul was so emphatic on this that in 2 Cor.12:9-10, he said he delighted in trials and suffering so that in his weakness he would know more of the power of Christ. He wanted so much to become like Jesus in every aspect, even in his death. (Php.3:8-11)

When I was going through a series of extremely trying trials, one day the Lord said to me, "Like Job, Satan has a wager with Me over your life." Initially I wasn't sure what to make of that. As time passed, I came to understand that it is not just with me but with everyone and that all of life is an ongoing test. Though my situation was very specific, underneath it all there is a "general" wager between Satan and God over the lives of everyone, and it goes something like this: Satan says to God, "You can save man, but can you make him become like You?" God, in His sovereign wisdom and timing, selects when and what Satan can do to each one of us and He removes His wall of protection over each of us part by part. For some of us, He removes a great deal at one go. For others it is long drawn out process. Ultimately, God's end goal is to fulfill His purpose of why He made us in the first place – made in His image, to be truly like Him.

As Paul and the writer of Hebrews said, God is looking for sons. He wants sons and daughters that look like Him, talk like Him, even smell like Him! And He wants His perfect bride. And everything in creation (even Satan and his rebellion) was set in place for no other reason than this.

When I made this point one of my friends asked, "Will He kill off one for the sake of another?" Yes, He says so in Isa.43:4 and Paul practically says the same thing and takes pains to expound on it from Rom.9-11. We all know the saying that sometimes we have to be cruel to be kind, right? Why then do we find it so difficult to apply that truth to God when he keeps saying it about Himself and His purposes? Have we become too soft about how much God loves us that we forget His holiness, His wrath, and His absolute right to judge? It might sound terribly cold and unkind, but everyone is going to die one day anyway. God's love is so great and hell is so terrible that there is nothing too terrible for God to do to try and get us back to Him. If God can put His Son through such terrible cruelty, for our sake, is there anything less He will not do?

### **Suffering Trains Us to Overcome**

God also made us in His image to rule, to have dominion. For that potential to be fully realized, we have to be put through testing. I believe we are being trained to be overcomers (Rom.8:37) not only for this life but the next. We are also being trained to reign and rule with Him over angels and cities (although we cannot be sure what that means). Every soldier knows this. No one is going to promote you to anything without putting you through the grind. Every test you pass only means that you just qualified for the next one. Every trial and difficulty however leaves us with a choice. Shall we choose to be bitter, or shall we choose to be humbled by it? Shall we choose to be made wiser, more patient, more forgiving, more loving, by it?

In a tragedy, we cannot help but question why God allows it to happen. Not everything is revealed. Sometimes we are, eventually, given answers. But even so, it does not really lessen the pain. Even when we steel ourselves to accept that God is God and we are not, it is still extremely difficult. Loss and pain however draws God to us (Ps.34:18, Isa.57:15), and us to God, and does in us a work of grace, in a way that nothing else can. We eventually become stronger, far stronger than before, and become a source of strength and life to others. Even knowledge of this does not really comfort us. Nevertheless, that is the process of life and death and everything in between, and we choose how we shall respond, and we choose the journey ahead. As mentioned earlier, we have to face up to the fact sooner or later, that death, for every one of us, is inevitable. The important thing is how we live while we have the opportunity.

### **Are We Not in Danger of Being Dogmatic/Arrogant?**

Some Christians worry that such a stand might come across as too dogmatic and arrogant. But how else can we read Rom.8:17-39, especially Rom.8:20-21? How else do we understand God's dealings with Israel and the other nations in the Old Testament, the numerous passages in the prophets especially in Isaiah, God declaring His sovereign right over everything and His sovereign right to judge the nations especially Isa.45:6-7, and Ecc.3:14, 18, how and why God dealt with Nebuchadnezzar, and all the end-time prophecies of judgment in Daniel and Isaiah and Revelations, and Rom. Chaps 9-11, and Heb.12? And how else can we read the all encompassing and uncompromising words of Eph.1:11 and Jesus' own words in Matt.10:29?

After reading all that (in fact, throughout the OT), is there anything that just “happens” without God being in total control and intending His purposes to be carried out? It seems to me that Scripture just doesn’t allow for that. Is it not abundantly clear in the scriptures that God is sovereign over everything? He lets nothing happen without a purpose and His purpose is that man may fear Him and acknowledge Him and return to Him and be reconciled with Him. His ultimate purpose is that we may be brought to holiness and glory, which is, that we may be fully in Christ and become like Christ, and become His true sons, which is why He created us in the first place. Behind all this is His love which goes beyond man’s comprehension. (Rom.8:18 and 2 Cor.4:16-5:5) Can we comprehend and accept that He purposely brings about pain and suffering to accomplish these purposes?

Does God have any other purpose? Paul makes it clear there is no other. In both Rom.8:17-39 and 2 Cor.4:16-5:5, and other passages, Paul clearly links why God allowed in sin and pain and suffering with God’s purpose to bring us to glory. So many Christians fail to understand God’s ultimate goal. Many think God is only interested in having as many people as possible in heaven. I believe that God is not interested in just saving souls. He wants true sons and daughters and true disciples who follow Him.

The day after Jesus fed the 5000, they went to look for Him. (John 6) When they found Him, Jesus said to them, *“I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill .... I am the bread of life .... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world ... I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”*

Except for the disciples that remained, they all left Him. Didn’t Jesus know that they all misunderstood Him (that He did not mean eating His flesh and drinking His blood literally)? Of course He did. Why then did He let them all walk away without stopping them and clarifying to them? I believe He was filtering off the true followers from those who only wanted to get something from Him.

### **How Shall We Respond to Pain and Suffering and to Disasters?**

In a disaster, like in an earthquake, just as each individual and family affected in different ways, there may be many purposes and causes going on at the same time but applied in different ways to different individuals and families - the outworking of sin from the very beginning and the deterioration of the earth, God’s wrath and judgment, God mercifully intervening into a community, God confronting man and calling him to repentance, God testing man, or God disciplining, purging, refining and developing character. Unless we are called by the Lord to discern which is which, and speak prophetically into a disaster that has occurred, or specifically to someone for their situation, it is not for us to stand in judgment of another. What should be of greater concern to us is how we will respond to the pain and tragedy of others.

Paul describes the whole of creation as groaning as in the pains of childbirth awaiting the day when God will bring the fullness of His kingdom on earth, and the whole of creation awaits the time when the true sons of God (those who will walk and love like Jesus) will be revealed. (Rom.8:19, 22) Shall we respond like the priest and Levite that passed by on the other side or like the good Samaritan that went out of his way to help? Shall we be sheep or shall we be goats? (Matt.25:31-46)

### **God’s Wrath, God’s Mercy and Intercession**

*“So I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out My wrath on them and consume them with My fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the sovereign Lord.”* Ezek.22:30

More than how we shall respond to human pain and tragedy is whether we understand **what is on the heart of God**. When we understand this, we will see our role in crisis response going

beyond the humanitarian call. While God's wrath may be released against people, His heart aches and longs for the people to be reconciled to Him.

Look at Jer.8:18-9:3: *"I will take away their harvest, declares the Lord. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them." "Why are we sitting here? Gather together! Let us flee to the fortified cities and perish there! For the Lord our God has doomed us to perish and given us poisoned water to drink, because we have sinned against Him. We hoped for peace but no good has come, for a time of healing but there was only terror. The snorting of the enemy's horses is heard from Dan; at the neighing of their stallions the whole land trembles. They have come to devour the land and everything in it, the city and all who live there." "See, I will send venomous snakes among you, vipers that cannot be charmed, and they will bite you," declares the Lord. O my comforter in sorrow, my heart is faint within me. Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away. "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king no longer there?" "Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?" "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." "Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?" "Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people. Oh that I had in the desert a lodging place for travelers. So that I might leave my people and go away from them; for their all adulterers, a crowd of unfaithful people." "They make ready their tongue like a bow, to shoot lies; it is not by truth that they triumph in the land. They go from one sin to another; they do not acknowledge me," declares the Lord. "Beware of your friends; do not trust your brothers. For every brother is a deceiver, and every friend a slanderer. Friend deceives friend, and no one speaks the truth. They have taught their tongues to lie; they weary themselves with sinning. You live in the midst of deception; in their deceit they refuse to acknowledge me," declares the Lord. Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty says, "See, I will refine and test them, for what else can I do because of the sin of my people? Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks with deceit. With his mouth each speaks cordially to his neighbor, but in his heart he sets a trap for him. Should I not punish them for this?" declares the Lord. "Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?"*

Who is speaking? It appears to be an interchange between Jeremiah and God. Some verses sound as if it is Jeremiah speaking and some verses sound as if it is God speaking. I believe it is not either Jeremiah or God; rather it is both Jeremiah and God in every one of those verses. It is God sharing His broken heart with Jeremiah and it is Jeremiah sharing his broken heart with God. It is a heart wrenching interchange between Jeremiah and God about the unfaithfulness and sin of the people and the consequent destruction and ruin that has come upon them. They are both weeping and pouring out their hearts – Jeremiah is really expressing what is on the heart of God. God is God. He has to judge; and yet He weeps and sorrows over the plight of the people He has to judge. Here is the example of the intercessor who feels what is on the heart of God and weeps with the Lord in intercession.

Moses is another example of the intercessor. God was so fed up with the sins of the Israelites, He told Moses that their sins had come up to His nostrils as a stench that was no longer bearable. He told Moses to stand aside and let His anger burn against them and He would consume all of them with the fire of His wrath and make for Moses a new generation of people. Moses stood in the gap between God and the people. He did not stand aside. Had he done so, God would have destroyed them all. Instead, Moses pleads with God – blot me out of Your book but spare these people! What was Moses saying? I believe Moses was the true intercessor.

What was really happening is, like Jeremiah, Moses was feeling both the wrath as well as the ache on God's heart and he was expressing back to God what was on His heart – to the extent that he would wish himself destroyed for the sake of his people. That's the heart of God. That was the very expression of God's heart at Calvary.

This really is the heart of Crisis Response – intercession – for the survivors, for those who in

God's mercy, still remain. I believe God is looking today for intercessors – those who would go and identify with those suffering and to stand in the gap between Him and them. When we go we do not go as the righteous to sinful unbelievers; we do not pray that God will have mercy on “them”. Rather we identify with them as common sinful humanity and plead the mercy of the Lord on “us”. Like Moses, we stand in the gap, reflecting back to God His mercy and compassion, pleading the Blood of the Lamb, the death and atoning sacrifice of God Himself, which is the expression of His Own heart of love and mercy for the people.

### **Crisis Response is Strategic Intercession for Kingdom Transformation**

Where He has injured and destroyed, God longs to heal and restore and to express His love and mercy, for that was His intention in the first place. The call and mission of the church in crisis response then is really one of priestly intercession – to discern such “Kairos” interventions and expeditiously get into that gap, between God and the community, not only in terms of prayer but to physically be there with water, food, shelter, medicine, comfort and love - to be an expression His love and mercy. This is the heart of crisis response. It is the ministry of reconciliation. Perhaps in no other sphere, is working as co-laborers with the Lord, more dynamic and evident. Crisis relief lays the foundation for rehabilitation and community restructuring and development and ultimately kingdom transformation.

### **The Church in Crisis Response**

Crisis response also presents the church with unparalleled opportunities for every member of the church to be “salt and light” in simple, down to earth ways outside of the four walls of church and traditional Gospel proclamation or classic missions.

We need however to guard against employing aid only as a bait or strategy to win over the lost, for that would be inhuman and deceptive, contrary to the Christ-like nature that we are called to emulate. Rather, crisis response is being there for people in their time of need in sensitive and appropriate ways, human to human, heart to heart. It is identifying with a fellow human in his suffering and pain, not catching him in his vulnerability. It is the call and indeed the responsibility of the church, like the Good Samaritan, to be a neighbor to people in their time of need. All the aid would be as essential a part of the Gospel of God's love as much as its message of truth that would be conveyed sensitively and at the right time.

That this is an acute need and also probably one of the most “opportune” (not opportunistic) ways for the whole church to be engaged in now, is evident from current statistics which show that crises and disasters are increasing and happening where the most unreached, unevangelized and poorest people are located in the world. Jesus said, *“as the Father has sent Me, in the same way I am sending you.”* John20:21

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PS. When I reflected on all this, I could come to only one conclusion: you've got to be utterly crazy, totally out of your mind, and madly, madly in love to be able to relate to all this. And that's the picture I have of God in Hosea and Jesus on the cross.