

# Chapter 3

## Christian Theology and Disasters: Where is God in All This?



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**Abstract** This chapter examines ways that disasters have led to reflection within Christian theology. Mention will be made of other religious traditions, but because of the volume of material available, the focus will be on biblical accounts of disasters, God's role in them, and discussions about how believers can and should respond to them. First, the chapter will examine accounts where God is stated to have sent disasters as a judgement for human sin. This will require a broad overview of some central theological positions. Then, the chapter will examine historical and contemporary claims that disasters can be blamed on human sin. This will lead to a review of theodicy, theological arguments developed to justify why God could allow evil and suffering, which could include disasters. Then some popular reactions to disasters that blame particular sins will be critiqued. In contrast, the Bible calls for responses that include practical help for those impacted by disasters. A full response must go further, including empathy for those hurt and working to overcome injustice when that has been a contributing factor. The final theological perspective is the belief that God works with believers to bring good out of bad situations, in spite of how bad the disaster can be. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how theological reflection can bring hope in the midst of disasters.

**Keywords** Bible · Image of God · Injustice · Judgement · Love · Theodicy · Theology

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### 3.1 Religion and Disasters

Theological ideas about disasters are common in English metaphors. We talk about a flood as being of biblical proportions (in reference to Noah's Flood in Genesis), about worldwide disasters being apocalyptic (in reference to the biblical Apocalypse and the Day of Judgment), and insurance companies talk of "acts of God," by which they mean natural disasters<sup>1</sup> that humans did not cause or could not reasonably have prevented (CBS 2015). For insurance purposes, an act of God could be a lightning strike that burns a home to the ground, or a tsunami swamping a city where one had never previously hit. The implicit presumption is that no one is to blame (and can't be sued), other than God (and he's not easily sued), so the insurance company will likely have to pay out (unless acts of God are not covered in the specific policy).

This insurance language links to probably the most common way in which theology is invoked in relation to disasters. Many ancient religions, from Greek and Roman mythology to various tribal religions, are thought to have arisen in response to various natural phenomena, including disasters. The view was that disasters occurred because the gods were angry and sent the disaster to punish guilty humans. Something was needed to appease the gods, and various rituals and sacrifices were developed, along with a priesthood to discern what is needed and carry out the appeasement activities. For example, according to Herodotus, often called "the Father of History," the earliest recorded tsunami, in 479 BC, was sent by the god of the sea, Poseidon, to punish the Persians for their siege of Potidaea. 'Such explanations were more nearly the norm for much of antiquity' (Molesky 2015, 150).

As scientific understandings of the world developed, so-called acts of God came to be viewed as natural phenomena. The world came to be seen as behaving in predictable ways, following natural laws that sometimes lead to destructive events like earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions and other disasters. In theology and philosophy, they have been called natural evils, in contrast with moral evils, because natural evils did not involve human choices. Bad things sometimes happen to humans when by chance they are in the path of some colossally powerful forces of nature. Science has no place for angry gods sending disasters as punishments.

And yet, when a village full of humans is incinerated by lava, or a city collapses in an earthquake, or thousands are drowned by a wave, we cry foul. This should not be! What have they done to deserve this? The innocent should not suffer this way. Why do bad things happen to good people? This may be the most common way that theological perspectives arise around disasters. Such reactions may not be very reflective, they may not be informed by much theology, but they happen frequently and reflect recognition of the widespread belief that something is wrong with our world. After the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, different Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist adherents claimed that the disasters

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<sup>1</sup>The term "natural disaster" is increasingly questioned because most disasters are influenced to some degree by human choices. I accept this view, and the issue is addressed here. The term "natural disaster" will be used occasionally in this chapter because the idea of a purely natural disaster arises in some relevant literature.

occurred because of various people's sins—usually those of adherents to other religions (Behreandt 2005; Lutzer 2011). This suggests that the view of disasters as divine punishment continues to be held. At the same time, some survivors give God the credit for saving them from disasters (Lutzer 2011; Molesky 2015).

Critics point out that even a quick examination of the devastation reveals that disasters do not carefully select between the guilty and the innocent. Babies and infants are often among the victims. If God was behind the destruction, could he not discern between the guilty and the innocent, or between adherents of one religion or another? This raises questions about God's role in disasters. 'Surely God can differentiate between those who try to live godly lives and those who spurn both God and man alike' (Behreandt 2005, 32). Or maybe, God judges indiscriminately, which raises more serious theological questions about his character.

### 3.2 Raising Theological Questions

Disaster responders and the field of disaster risk reduction focus on the many practical and scientific challenges with disasters. But other, deeper questions arise. 'Earthquakes, the New York towers, the barbarity in Afghanistan, the AIDS pandemic make us think and force us to wrestle with ourselves ... such thinking ... challenges us and raises questions that cannot be ignored' (Sobrinho 2004, xxvii). Many of these questions are framed and answered in theological language. 'Disasters pull us up sharp and make us face head-on the hard questions of life and death. For atheists and agnostics they challenge humankind's hubris that we can control our environment—or that our cleverness can keep us from suffering. For Christians they raise the hard question of why an all-powerful, all-loving God allows such things to happen' (White 2014, 19).

Such questions are not new. One of the most devastating disasters in modern history hit Lisbon on 1 November 1755. The Great Lisbon Earthquake and its subsequent tsunami and fires killed tens of thousands of people and destroyed most of Lisbon (Molesky 2015). The impact was much deeper. 'Just as earthquakes create aftershocks, natural disasters create religious aftershocks. Believers wrestle with doubts; unbelievers use disasters as justification for their refusal to believe in a loving God' (Lutzer 2011, 5). The Great Lisbon Earthquake led to theological, philosophical and scientific reactions from such renowned thinkers as Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Johann von Goethe, Adam Smith and John Wesley. 'In the 5 years following the disaster, hundreds of books, articles, letters, treatises, poems, reviews, sermons, and scientific tracts on the subject were published across the continent ... Was God solely to blame or had nature or a combination of natural forces played the leading role? And perhaps more importantly: how could a just and all-powerful God have sanctioned the deaths of so many innocent people? The ensuing debate was arguably the most significant of the European Enlightenment' (Molesky 2015, 322). The debate was not restricted to philosophers

and theologians, but was a widespread public event. Historian Molesky concludes that, 'It was the Lisbon Earthquake's impact on human history, however, that distinguishes it from all other natural catastrophes, before or since ... Once again in its history, the West found its conceptions of God, Nature, and Providence under a barrage of scrutiny' (2015, 19).

### 3.3 The General Approach

The theological responses elicited by disasters vary widely. This chapter could not possibly address how every religion examines these issues, so it will focus on Christianity. Even developing a Christian perspective on disasters is not straightforward. Differences exist on many theological issues between Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and other branches and denominations of Christianity. Just as debates occur over what the founder of every philosophy meant, and different branches develop over time, Christianity is no different. The approach here will be to examine what can be learned from the main theological resource that all branches of Christianity take as authoritative in one way or another: the Bible. What has the Bible to say about disasters, God's role in them, and how humans should respond to them? No doubt my understanding of these issues will be debated, but that may help further these discussions.

### 3.4 Disasters as God's Judgment

The Bible records many disasters. Some are household names in many parts of the world (Noah's Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Plagues visited on Egypt in Moses' time). God is declared to have sent these events as judgments on human sin (understood as human moral failure, where people fail to live and act according to the ways that God has declared to be best). The explicit nature of such declarations makes it necessary to address how and why the Judeo-Christian God could be justified in using such means to judge human sin.

It should be noted that the Bible mentions many disasters without linking them to judgment. For example, famines are noted in the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Naomi, David, Elijah and the early Christian church (White 2014 has an extensive table of biblical famines). These events are mentioned in various accounts, some leading to significant people movements and others having little obvious significance. God is not said to have had any role in these and other disasters. The implicit message is that disasters happen, and people respond in practical ways—much like today. The Bible does not claim that God's hand of judgment can be seen in every disaster.

At the same time, holding the Bible to be theologically authoritative in any way requires an examination of the disasters declared to be God's judgment. To do so, raises some central theological doctrines in Christianity. The Bible states that God created the world and it was "very good" (Genesis 1). We need not concern ourselves here with debates over whether the world was created perfect or with events like meteor strikes and earthquakes before humans appeared (addressed by Fretheim 2010). Astronomical and geological events that do not impact humans are usually not categorised as disasters since definitions focus on human impact. Our reflections begin with the introduction of humans, which in the Bible starts with Adam and Eve. God gives them a few simple commands, but they quickly make a mess of things. They give in to the temptation to do things their own way. They sin and are judged by being driven from the Garden of Eden. No longer will they live in harmony with the world: childbearing will be painful, work will be toil, and instead of social harmony, conflict and violence will erupt. The claim is that sin led to death and destruction, and that even nature changed. The whole world has been groaning ever since, and bound to a path of decay (Romans 8:19–22). In this very general sense, disasters are part of God's judgment on human sin.

In the biblical account, moral evil spread quickly, and people inflicted more and more pain on one another. God saw that human wickedness became so extensive that judgment was required, resulting in Noah's Flood (Genesis 6–8). The biblical claim is that as Creator of the Universe, God is justified in upholding moral standards and punishing evil. Sometimes he does this using disasters, as declared by many Old Testament prophets. Just as human authorities are entrusted with enforcing their jurisdiction's laws, God has authority over humanity. Accepting this or not underlies the debate over God's existence and his nature, which is too extensive to review here. Human sin fractured the harmonious relationships between God and humans, among humans, and between humans and the environment. This requires a response. Ignoring sin is not compatible with God's justice. We would not tolerate a justice system that lets law-breakers go free without judgment.

However, God's justice must coexist with his love, which the Bible reveals through his extension of forgiveness. His plans culminate in Jesus's death and resurrection, and his offer of forgiveness as a free gift to all who will accept it (Ephesians 2:8–9). With this comes restoration of someone's relationship with God and spiritual healing. But people continue to live in the world as it now exists. The human body and the natural world continue according to the laws of nature, with sickness, death and disasters now part of our world. The Bible records some miracles, where God intervenes to restore physical health or counteract a law of nature. And sometimes he intervenes with a disaster to judge human sin. But for the most part, illness, death and disasters continue according to the laws of nature and the outcomes of human choices. The Bible claims that a time will come when the world will be restored after the Day of Judgment. After that, humans will live in a situation where pain and suffering will no longer exist and creation will be rid of disasters (Revelation 22). The hope of that future time is something believers can cling to as they face disasters and other forms of suffering.

### 3.5 Theodicy

Given the biblical claim that God has sent some disasters as judgment, many wonder if a particular disaster is a judgment from God. Even if not God's punishment, they wonder why he would not protect people from harm. The God of Christianity is said to be a loving God who cares for people, and also a powerful God who has authority over nature. Why then does he allow disasters?

Such questions have been asked throughout the Christian era and various theological responses developed. Each is called a theodicy, a term coined by Gottfried Leibniz. He published *Théodicée* in 1710 in which he argued that God had created 'the best of all possible worlds' (Leibniz, cited in Molesky 2015, 327). This belief fit well with the optimism and progress of that time, as even the climate seemed to be steadily improving (Molesky 2015). After the Great Lisbon Earthquake, Leibniz's theodicy came under considerable attack, particularly by Voltaire who argued that the disaster was incompatible with this being the best possible world. Voltaire also rejected claims that Lisbon was destroyed as part of God's judgment, sarcastically wondering if Lisbon was more evil than London or Paris. Yet, 'Lisbon is shattered, and Paris dances' (Voltaire, cited in Molesky 2015, 328).

The problem of theodicy is particularly relevant for Christianity because the Bible claims that God is all-loving and all-powerful. Not all religions hold to this view of a personal God. Reality shows that evil and suffering happen. Surely an all-powerful God would prevent bad things from happening to the people he loves. Therefore, either God is not all-loving, or he's not all-powerful, or he does not exist. The latter conclusion leads to debates between atheism and theism, while the first two conclusions raise perplexing difficulties for believers. How could the God whom Christians worship allow things like disasters?

Within such arguments lies a hidden premise. The assumption is that a loving God prevents bad things from happening to those he loves. Yet in the real world, we do not live that way. Loving parents allow their children to make age-appropriate choices, some of which have risks and sometimes negative consequences. A parent who refuses to do so, we call over-protective. Loving couples who do not allow their partners to socialise with others, we call domineering, or controlling. Within a loving relationship, people do not exercise all the power available to them to ensure everyone does the "right thing." The result is that children fall and hurt themselves, they sometimes get into trouble, and people hurt one another in their relationships. The question is whether giving people such freedom is justified. In human relationships, we believe it is.

The Free Will Defence is one theodicy that argues that God was justified in creating a world in which humans have real moral freedom. A key theological premise in Christianity (and the other Abrahamic religions, but not Eastern religions) is that God is personal and seeks loving relationships with humans. For relationships to exhibit attributes like trust, love, faith, etc., they must be entered into without compulsion (O'Mathúna 1999). Only if God was more concerned about good behaviour than personal relationships would he compel people to believe in him. Love requires

freedom. A robot can be programmed to always obey its owner, but then the relationship between the two would not be personal. Freedom risks pain, and hence a child can reject his parents, a spouse can be unfaithful, or a parent can be abusive. These risks are necessary in a world where freedom, love and personal relationships exist.

If God intervened every time we could be hurt, much pain and suffering could be avoided, but our free will would be an illusion. The world as we know it would not exist. Every time someone went to punch another person, his arm would fail to work. Every time someone went to pour pollutants into the environment, the container would not open. So many “miracles” would have to happen that people ‘could not entertain rational expectations, make predictions, estimate probabilities, or calculate prudence’ (Reichenbach 1982, 103). A world without predictable consequences would make morality and moral responsibility impossible, or at least extremely different to what we understand by morality. Science as we know it would be impossible because God would be interfering constantly with nature and people to prevent human suffering. The result would be a world ‘in which wrong actions were impossible, and in which, therefore, freedom of the will would be void; ... evil thoughts would be impossible, for the cerebral matter which we use in thinking would refuse its task when we attempted to frame them’ (Lewis 1940, 21). Such is clearly not the world we inhabit. Thus, our world corresponds well with the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful God who so values loving relationships that he allows free will to exist even though this risks allowing humans to experience pain and suffering.

Theodicies have tended to focus on either moral evil (suffering caused by humans) or natural evil (suffering caused by nature, such as natural disasters or genetic defects). The free will defence may seem irrelevant for natural disasters. It clearly applies to such things as sabotage leading to industrial disasters; greed that leads people to cut corners when constructing buildings so that they collapse more easily during earthquakes; hatred that leads to violence and conflict; or war that results in famine or refugee crises.

Increasingly, however, the distinction between natural disasters and manmade (or technological) disasters is becoming less tenable to hold (ten Have 2014), making the free will theodicy more relevant to disasters in general. The eighteenth century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau reacted to the debate over God’s role in the Great Lisbon Earthquake claiming that human decisions were more to blame for the disaster’s consequences than nature or God. Responding to Voltaire, he stated ‘but it was hardly Nature that had assembled there twenty thousand houses of six or seven stories. If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all’ (Rousseau, cited in Molesky 2015, 331).

Robert White notes that ‘the deaths caused by “natural” disasters can often be attributed almost in their entirety to actions taken by people, which turned a natural process into a disaster. In that respect there is nothing “natural” about them’ (2014, 19–20). As examples, he notes that many who died in the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami were living in areas zoned as unsuitable for houses, but they had nowhere



else to live; and in the 2011 Fukushima earthquake in Japan, most fatalities were among those who ignored warnings to flee the tsunami because they assumed the sea walls would protect them. A report prepared for the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development concluded that the deaths in New Orleans should not be blamed on Hurricane Katrina. 'This catastrophe did not result from an act of "God". It resulted from acts of "People" ... because of a large number of flaws and defects that had been embedded in the system' (Team Louisiana 2006, Appendix 6).

The free will defence is applicable to such human decisions, but critics still question why an all-powerful God would not eliminate large-scale disasters that bring massive destruction and many casualties. The Natural Law Theodicy was hinted at above, which raises the necessity of an orderly universe governed by natural law. In a world where choices are to be judged as good or bad, a significant amount of predictability is required. Having a good degree of confidence in the consequences of choices is necessary to hold people accountable ethically. 'If man is to have a free and responsible choice of destiny, he needs to have a range of actions open to him, whose consequences, good and evil, he understands, and he can only have that understanding in a world which already has built into it many natural processes productive of both good and evil' (Swinburne 1987, 165).

When a boulder moves on a mountain-side, we know it will roll downhill—not uphill. When we see a natural rock-fall, we know that rolling rocks wreak havoc. We learn from nature that boulders rolling onto roads and hitting cars will probably injure or kill passengers, cause grief to their relatives and friends, and fear in other motorists. If the boulder was to stop rolling because its path could result in suffering, or if trees could be smashed but not cars because their occupants would be hurt, we would lose much of our ability to predict outcomes and this would eliminate accountability and true moral choice. Therefore, God is justified in allowing a world with potentially catastrophic events even if this can result in pain and suffering for humans.

Critics of natural law theodicy argue that God could have made a world where physical pain and suffering did not occur (e.g. a heavenly world). This raises questions about why the physical world exists, which go beyond the focus of this chapter. Given that the physical world does exist, and that we are born into it, another criticism is that the world could have different natural laws which lead to much less human suffering. However, natural laws are not abstract mathematical equations, but descriptions of how natural objects act and react under certain conditions (O'Mathúna 1999). To change these laws would require changing the very nature of those objects. For example, water would have to become something in which people could not drown. This would change many related properties that make water the material we recognise and which supports life. We have no way of predicting what "non-drowning water" would be like, and certainly no way of knowing if it would lead to a world with less suffering. In this case, the burden of proof is on the critic to provide a model of a universe with alternative natural laws. It remains reasonable to believe that God was justified in choosing the natural laws we have, even though they lead to geological events like volcanos, earthquakes, hurricanes and tornados.



The destructiveness of such events is clear and tragic, but their elimination would not be so straight-forwardly beneficial. 'But paradoxically, many of the processes that make it possible for humans to live on earth are the same as those that give rise to disasters' (White 2014, 27). Floods negatively affect more people than all other disasters combined, yet they are essential for soil fertility. For millennia, the flooding of the River Nile enabled the agricultural prosperity that allowed Egypt to flourish. In 1783, the largest volcanic eruptions in Iceland for 1000 years led to reduced rainfall in Africa (Oman et al. 2006). The following year, the Nile did not flood, and then the crops failed leading to a famine where one sixth of Egypt's population either died or left the country. In similarly paradoxical ways, earthquakes are both destructive and allow minerals and nutrients to emerge from within the Earth and allow life to thrive. We have no idea whether life on Earth would be possible without the events we call disasters (White 2014).

What can be concluded from such theological reflections is that rational justifications can be provided to address why the God of the Bible could allow disasters to occur. Whether these are found to be convincing or not is another matter. This often depends on whether someone is willing to believe that the Bible's God is trustworthy and loving, in spite of the existence of disasters and the suffering they bring. This gets at the core of what faith involves: a willingness to act on the basis of trust, in spite of the lack of certainty. As with most areas of life, evidence takes us only so far; at some point, a faith decision must be made based on trust, not certainty.

### 3.6 Is Someone to Blame?

Even with theodicies, people grapple with the personal dimension of suffering. Many will be more concerned about why a disaster struck here and now, not whether God was justified. People ask, "Why didn't God protect us?" or "What have we done to deserve this?" Different religious voices add substance to these questions. The US televangelist, Pat Robertson, claimed that the 2010 earthquake in Haiti could be linked to an eighteenth century pact the Haitians made with the devil to rid themselves of their French colonisers (James 2010). Hurricane Katrina was claimed by some Christians to have been God's punishment for abortion or homosexuality (Cooperman 2005), by a Muslim official as Allah's punishment for the US's involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq (Lopez 2005), and by a former Israeli chief rabbi as punishment for President George W. Bush's support for the dismantlement of Israeli settlements in Gaza (Alush 2005). The Mayor of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, C. Ray Nagin, claimed, 'God is mad at America. He sent us hurricane after hurricane after hurricane' (Martel 2006). An African American, he elaborated that God 'is upset at black America also. We're not taking care of ourselves.'

Such claims can add to the pain of those already devastated by the disaster, and have been strongly criticised as theologically misguided. Each claim loses credibility when the diversity of those blamed is examined. Yet such blaming persists. After the Great Lisbon Earthquake, Roman Catholic preachers said God was judging the

sins of Lisbon, Protestants said he was judging the Catholic Inquisition, and supporters of the Inquisition said God was angry because the Inquisition had not gone far enough (Lutzer 2011). Rather than explaining why any particular disaster has occurred, these attempts confirm how little people know about the divine origins of disasters, and say more about human psychology. 'Whenever tragedy strikes, we each have a tendency to interpret it in light of what we believe God is trying to say (or what we want Him to say) ... We see in natural disasters exactly what we want to see' (Lutzer 2011, 9).

The Bible provides additional reasons for rejecting such speculations. Jesus was asked whether a group of Galileans killed by Pilate, and whether eighteen people killed when a tower fell on them, were worse sinners than others living in Jerusalem (Luke 13:1–5). He replied with an emphatic, No! Instead, Jesus called on his listeners to consider their own standing before God. Jesus implies that people are injured and killed in disasters because they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Another time, Jesus was asked if a man was born blind because of his own sin or that of his parents (John 9:1–3). Again, he categorically denied that the blindness was due to anyone's sin. Instead, he said that God would be revealed in this man's life. Sickness, injury or death, in a disaster or any other situation, cannot be assumed to be God's judgment on a specific sin.

Such accounts are in keeping with possibly the most extensive discussion of suffering in the Bible. The Book of Job is about a good, religious man, better than anyone else on Earth (Job 1:8). Yet God allows one disaster after another to enter his life resulting in the loss of all his livestock, wealth and even his ten children. Then he gets painful sores all over his body. Job's wife questions his integrity, and urges him to curse God and die. As he sits in grief and agony, three friends come to "comfort" him. Much like modern speculators of religious judgment, they claim Job's suffering must be due to some terrible sin, and urge him to repent. Job adamantly refuses to accept this perspective. In the end, he is vindicated by God. The disasters were not brought on by his sin. Job, like everyone, is not sinless, but God was not judging Job because of any particular sin. In an ending that many would find difficult to accept, Job was never given an explanation for why the bad things had happened in his life.

The Bible's consistent position is that in most cases, we don't know if a particular sickness, disease, or disaster has any divine involvement. We may never know why something happened. Disasters, diseases and devastation can have purely physical causes like geological upheavals, microbes, or genetic mutations, or can have a mixture of human and natural causes. Christians must also acknowledge that disasters *could* be divine judgments, since, as noted earlier, the Bible states that God has sent disasters as punishments for human sin. But these accounts note that they happened for specific actions and occurred after many warnings were ignored. Additionally, the Book of Jonah recounts the story of Nineveh, whose people listened to God's warnings, changed their behaviour, and the disaster was averted. These accounts are very different to those of today where people attempt to identify God's judging hand with retrospective speculation.

### 3.7 Bad Things Happen to Good People

Another related difficulty is how the Old Testament repeatedly states that God will reward those who obey his law, and punish those who do not (e.g. Deuteronomy 11:26–28). The theological context for such statements is important. These rewards and punishments were promised to ancient Israel as part of a Covenant entered willingly during a period when God’s kingdom was geophysical as well as spiritual (Deuteronomy 5:27). Although God brought disaster on Israelites when they failed to live up to their side of the agreement, he repeatedly sent warnings to them through the prophets. These accounts should not be taken as the normative way God deals with all people at all times.

The Bible promises blessings for those who follow God, but also describes how followers get sick, suffer, and eventually die. The promised blessings are linked primarily to spiritual health and growth (3 John 2). Faithful followers of God are not immune from pain and suffering, nor the consequences of disasters. The psalmist observed that good things happen to bad people. ‘I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills ... All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning’ (Psalm 73:3–5, 14). People wonder why bad things happen to good people. The Bible’s response is that there has only ever been one good person, and he suffered supremely. Jesus, the son of God, was tortured to death in the most horrific way. We should not be surprised when bad things happen to us, no matter how good we believe we have been. Instead, ‘there is no one who does good, not even one’ (Romans 3:12). We are all on the same moral footing with God, which is why we have no basis for thinking one person is better than another or deserves to suffer more or less than another.

This returns us to the recognition that human choices are involved in many disasters. Instead of speculation about a disaster being God’s judgment on someone or other, disasters should lead to reflection on the values underlying human decisions. We sense that responsibility lies somewhere, but where? Jon Sobrino is a theologian who has lived through devastating earthquakes and civil war in El Salvador. He draws a loose parallel between theodicy and anthropodicy. Sometimes God is blamed ‘to excuse human beings from their responsibility for evil’ (Sobrino 2004, 27). We should question God’s apparent lack of involvement in disasters, but also reflect carefully about human roles. Believers can be reluctant to question God, but others are reluctant to question humanity ‘so as not to diminish the power conferred by science, democracy, etc. ... The challenge to God, and to human beings, is where were they *both* ... in the African Great Lakes, Haiti, Bangladesh, countries that live, as we do, side by side with the scandalous profligacy of the North?’ (Sobrino 2004, 27).

This may be why disasters cause such deep angst. We are confronted with the gross injustices in the world. Most people live in abject poverty while the minority consume most of the world’s resources. An earthquake ‘is an X-ray of the country. It is mostly the poor who get killed, the poor who are buried, the poor who have to

run out with the four things they have left, the poor who sleep outdoors, the poor who live in anguish over the future, the poor who face enormous obstacles trying to rebuild their lives, the poor who cannot get financial credit' (Sobrinho 2004, 3). Such injustice exists in high-income countries too. Hurricane Katrina disproportionately devastated poorer neighbourhoods in New Orleans, which years later continue to be the slowest to recover basic amenities (White 2014). The big question is why we humans regularly make choices to not provide for the poor or the oppressed, even when we have the means to do so. 'Tragedies like an earthquake have natural causes, of course, but their unequal impact is not due to nature; it stems from the things people do with each other, to each other, against each other. The tragedy is largely the work of our own hands. We shape the planet with massive, cruel, and lasting injustice' (Sobrinho 2004, 3–4). This, in part, is why the Bible claims that no one is good and why judgment is justified.

In this general sense, disasters can be said to be part of God's judgment. Humans want to run the world their way, and God allows them. Disasters are a reminder that this world is not the way God wanted. Adam and Eve's sin brought judgement that resulted in disease and death, and changed the world. Now the whole of creation groans and decays. The hope of the afterlife is part of what allows Christians to hold on to the promise of a better life after this 'valley of the shadow of death' (Psalm 23:4). Even in this life, though, God allows suffering to continue, partly to permit human free will, but also to bring good out of the bad. Even though we may never know the cause of a disaster, we can work to bring good from it. This can happen if the exposure of injustice motivates people to work to restore justice, to "build back better." It can also happen if it leads people to respond to the disaster by helping those in need.

### 3.8 Call to Action

Throughout the Bible, believers are called to aid the poor, the sick, the oppressed, orphans, refugees—anyone who is vulnerable. In part, this is because all humans are made in the image of God, which confers everyone with both inherent dignity and moral responsibility. To live ethically is to act as an authentic image of God, doing what God would do (O'Mathúna 1995). The Bible portrays God as the defender of the weak and helpless (Psalm 68:5; Luke 6:20–22; James 1:27). This includes helping those devastated by disasters. For example, during the Roman Empire, the early spread of Christianity was influenced by how Christians responded to plagues. As healthy Romans fled their cities, Christians stayed and helped those in need, sometimes at the cost of their own lives (Stark 1996). In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther commended those Christians who felt God called them to help those afflicted with the Black Death (Luther 1527). In the nineteenth century, Henri Dunant saw first-hand the pain and suffering of wounded soldiers and committed himself to doing something about it. He gathered a small group of Swiss Christians, united in their theology and 'the moral sense of the importance of human life, the

humane desire to lighten a little the torments' of those suffering (Dunant, cited in Moorhead 1998, 17). Thus was born the Red Cross, and soon led to the first Geneva Convention for the protection of wounded soldiers.

Disaster responders are motivated by many reasons, religious and nonreligious. Belief in God is not required to help others. The claim here is that followers of the Christian God *should be* motivated to help those in need. This should go beyond providing aid, as this can be a way to ease one's conscience or avoid addressing underlying injustices. Christianity calls for solidarity with others because all humans are part of one family, all equally images of God. As defined by Sobrino, 'Solidarity means *letting oneself be affected* by the suffering of other human beings, sharing their pain and tragedy' (2004, 19, emphasis original). Jesus is the example here, as he wept over his friends' grief (John 11:35), suffered on the Cross, and knows what it is like to suffer. The God of the Bible feels with humanity, and takes on the pain of their suffering.

True solidarity with those impacted by disasters should lead to internal change. Rather than looking backwards and speculating about why God allowed a disaster, believers are called to look forward to how they can learn and grow from the event. This may be in compassion towards others, taking action to help, or learning to help better. The Bible does not guarantee immunity from sickness, suffering or disasters, but offers a better way to deal with those times (Philippians 4:10–13). This involves belief and trust that a loving God has allowed something to happen and can bring good from it.

This has been called the character or soul building theodicy, where pain and suffering help us mature. As with all change, it can be painful. As noted above, injustice is deeply rooted in the world and within people. We may not be willing to change until we experience suffering, either ours or others. 'Things that contribute to a person's humbling, to his awareness of his own evil, and to his unhappiness with his present state contribute to his willing God's help' (Stump 1985, 409). Sometimes it takes a disaster to bring this to our attention.

Theological reflection about disasters must include some discussion about personal responses to disasters. Those with little time for religion may be sceptical about this, but it is key for believers. Such responses may only make sense after someone has spent time getting to know God. Joseph, well-known for his technicolour coat, is an important biblical example. His brothers beat him up and sold him into slavery. He would gain some freedom, only to suffer at the hands of someone else's evil schemes. Eventually, a disastrous famine gave Joseph the opportunity to do good for his captors, and be reunited with his brothers. Rather than seek vengeance on them, he declared that while they intended to harm him, God brought good out of their evil intentions (Genesis 50:20). God did not cause the suffering, nor encourage his brothers and others to harm Joseph, but he brought good from several bad situations. Central to that outcome was Joseph continuing to trust God in the midst of violence, betrayal and disasters. Likewise, Paul in the New Testament states that in all things, including all types of evil and disasters, God works for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28). What is not offered is an answer to why a disaster happens, or who is to blame. Likewise, it may not be clear how, or when,

or to whom, the good will come, but the promise of good is given for those who trust him. This is why waiting on God is a central theological theme.

At the same time, the Bible does not claim that pain and suffering should be accepted stoically or without protest. Psalms are the prayers of the Bible and show that lament and crying and protest in the midst of bad times are appropriate (Wilson 2002). “Why, Lord, ... do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 10, 13, 22). When situations are overwhelming, the only response left for a believer is to cling to God, “my rock, my fortress and my deliverer” (Psalm 18:2).

In the Psalms and the story of Job, answers are not provided. The same was noted above in Jesus’ response to “Why?” questions. Easy explanations for the causes of disasters are not provided; guarantees that God will prevent or remove suffering are not provided. Pat answers that God will quickly make everything good do not help. Instead, faith offers confidence that God can be trusted in the midst of suffering, even if much remains unclear and uncertain. This trust is based on the nature of God’s character (loving, faithful, just, etc.), and not any particular outcome, no matter how desirable. Such faith includes the hope that in the future, maybe as far away as the afterlife, things will be rectified and restored to the way God intended. In this way, religious faith, for those who believe, can contribute to personal resilience in the midst of disasters.

### 3.9 Conclusion

Disasters remind us that the world is not the way it should be. The world contains much beauty, and the Bible, particularly the Psalms, uses this to point towards the beauty and awe that is part of God’s character. But the world also contains terrifying parts. Recently, I hiked about a kilometre from where a volcano erupted a few years earlier. Smoke still billowed forth from the crater; beside me were boulders, weighing up to 3 tonnes, which had been hurled through the sky. We are not in control of our world. The world is beautiful, but it is also dangerous. C. S. Lewis represented God as a lion in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. One character asked if the lion is safe. ‘Safe?’ he wrote ‘Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you’ (Lewis 1950, 86).

The beauty of the world reminds us of God’s good side, and disasters remind us of his dangerous side. He created the world with love and beauty, and humans introduced sin and ugliness. This requires a just response, which theology calls God’s judgment. Injustice demands justice; ask any victim. God’s judgment is how the Bible describes the bringing of justice. The Bible records that this has happened with specific events from time-to-time, but it does not claim that every disaster is the direct act of God. Various theodicies have provided justifications for why God allows disasters to continue. The Bible claims that someday this will end and the world will be restored to how it should have been. Meanwhile, living in this

imperfect world, God uses suffering and disasters to call people back to himself and to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with him (Micah 6:8).

Such beliefs should impact someone's ethics and actions. Those who believe in a generous, loving God should express that love in practical ways. Those with the world's possessions should be moved with compassion for those in need and act in practical ways (1 John 3:16). Since God has a particular concern for the vulnerable, Christians should also (James 1:27). Given the view that all humans are made in the image of God, discrimination and injustice are unethical. At the same time, each believer is on a journey to take on more of God's character traits as his or her own character undergoes ethical transformation. And when Christians are hit by disasters, their belief that God can bring good from a bad situation should provide hope and resilience. Disasters should cause all of us to reflect deeply on what matters most in life. They remind us that we are not in control in this world, and will all ultimately face death. The Bible rejects the tendency to speculate about disasters as God's judgment on past behaviour, but instead calls on people to reflect on where we each stand with God. We don't need to be good enough to earn his acceptance; we are asked to be humble enough to accept his goodness and grace. Disasters remind us that all people deserve our help. They call on people to commit themselves to helping those in need, both through meeting their immediate needs in the disaster and working to overcome the injustices that exist in the world and contribute to the devastation of disasters.

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