

A Perfectly Skewed Logic

by Dr. Tom Ricks

Thursday, January 28, 2010

I'm going to take a one week break from Galatians to discuss some of the theological questions and opinions surrounding the disaster in Haiti. We will return to Galatians next week, Lord willing!

People often ask, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Typically they ask this question in the context of God. The question is really more along the lines of "How could a good God allow innocent people to suffer?" I've always found this to be more of a statement than a question. Reading between the lines I hear the following:

- I know enough about the world to determine what is good and what isn't; I am the arbiter of right and wrong. My reason alone is my moral compass.
- Therefore, everything that I determine to be bad is bad regardless of what God may have to say about it.
- I assume my own innocence and the innocence of most others so anything bad that happens to us is morally wrong.
- Human suffering is always bad whether it is inflicted upon people by others or the result of disease or natural disaster.
- When mankind suffers, God is either evil (since he has the power to stop it and does not intervene) or he is incapable of controlling the cosmos and is incompetent.

Applying this logic to Haiti, one can conclude that God is culpable regardless of why. He either allowed it to happen which begs the question, "what did the people of Haiti ever do to God?," or his cosmos is spinning out of control and such natural disasters only serve as proof that the Almighty cannot restrain nature.

The only other conclusion one can draw lacks a serious look at scripture - God does not exist and we are on our own, victims or benefactors of evolution and pure dumb luck. You and I just happened to be born in the United States and are therefore spared this time around. (Let those of us in STL not forget a little crack in the earth's surface named "The New Madrid Fault" lest we get too comfortable.) The citizens of Haiti are simply unfortunate to have gotten that draw in the gene pool. To give credit or to blame God is foolish. This is the conclusion of James Wood, author of "The Book Against God," in a recent article:

Terrible catastrophes inevitably encourage appeals to God. We who are, at present, unfairly luckier, whether believers or not, might reflect on the almost invariably uncharitable history of theodicy, and on the reality that in this context no invocation of God beyond a desperate appeal for help makes much theological sense. For either God is punitive and interventionist, or as capricious as nature and so absent as to be effectively nonexistent. Unfortunately, the Bible, which frequently uses God's power over earth and seas as the sign of his majesty and intervening power, supports the first view; and the history of humanity's lonely suffering decisively suggests the second.¹

If you go back to my initial observation about our reactions to suffering, I think you can recognize Wood's logic, *"I know what is good and what is evil. People are basically good and don't deserve to go through this kind of tragedy. Human suffering is bad. God claims to be in control but human suffering proves he is not. God does not exist. We were just lucky this time so let's go help clean up the mess and get on with life."*

So, how does a disciple of Jesus respond to both the tragedy and the argument that we must leave God out of the conversation? Is there a reasoned response? Recently, Pat Robertson offered something along the lines of, *"The people of Haiti deserve this because they made a pact with the Devil to gain independence from the French. They embraced evil and are being punished by God for their transgressions."* Other than throwing Mr. Wood and others like him into intellectual apoplexy, I am afraid Dr. Robertson's comments do not serve to clear anything up, not because they are completely off-base, but because they neither go far enough into scripture nor do they consider all sides of the equation. I am sure Pat Robertson is a fine person with an astute mind, but he has just described the proverbial elephant while blindfolded and only holding the tail. He has said just enough to look really, really bad. So, what else can be said?

First, we cannot say why this happened in Haiti. It is a historical fact that the early leaders of the slaves who threw off their French masters practiced voodoo and other satanic rituals. I have been to Haiti twice and this practice is still very much a part of the Haitian way of life. However, to suggest that this is the sole reason for this earthquake is foolish. We do not know the mind of God and cannot speak for him in this matter nor does he need us to. People in Haiti are sinful according to the Bible (Luke 11:13ff, Romans 1, Romans 3, Ephesians 1:1-2), but so are the people

¹ James Wood, "Between God and a Hard Place," *The New York Times*, 24 January 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/24/opinion/24wood.html>

of the United States and Brazil and Germany and Japan and ... To claim to speak for God in declaring this catastrophe as his chastisement against the Haitian's sin is not our place. Jesus points to this in Luke 13:1-5.

Secondly, we cannot look at this tragedy or any other for that matter, in terms of human innocence because innocence or guilt is not based on how we stack up against one another. One could say many people hurt or killed in this disaster were innocent to the extent they were not acting with evil towards others and ultimately deserved what they got. But we cannot say anyone is innocent when compared against God's holiness. If you read the verses I listed above, you read "no one is righteous, not even one." The author is not speaking of our ability to act with some amount of decency toward one another, but of our ability to live perfectly before God. We have not slipped-up or made a few mistakes; we have volitionally and continually rebelled against God. We reject him at every turn. God offered us life and peace (Genesis 1-2), but we threw it back in his face, determined to fight against him and become our own gods. In this manner, every man woman and child is guilty. Our babies look cute and innocent (you should see how adorable I was as a baby), but every one of us grows up flawed before God and eventually (by the age of 2-3) we begin to show the wonderful traits of selfishness, anger, stubbornness, resentment and disrespect just to name a few.

Thirdly, the Bible is clear that when man chose to sin he drew the cosmos into a death spiral with him (Genesis 3, Romans 8:18-23). Jesus warns his disciples that there will be natural disasters in this world (Mathew 24:7). The Apostle John's vision in Revelation speaks in metaphorical language of both manmade and natural turbulence (Revelations 6, 8 & 9). Natural disasters happen because man has left his God, stubbornly refusing to repent and turn to him seeking forgiveness and grace. It may be convenient to lay the blame for such events at the feet of God, but that action simply reinforces what scripture says about our culpability. Look at Revelation 9:20-21:

²⁰The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.

Through John, Jesus is telling us that these terrible events are evidence that the world is broken by our sin and that they **should** move us to see our sin for what it is, repent and turn to God for mercy. Instead, the human race digs in its heels even more defiantly, adamantly refusing the grace that God offers in Christ Jesus. With all due respect to Mr. Wood, his recent column only serves to prove this point. I have nothing against the man, in fact I enjoy his writing style and appreciate some of his insights, but his reaction makes me shutter when I see the words of the Revelation

playing themselves out with complete accuracy right before my eyes.

So, how does the disciple of Jesus react? Do we get into a shouting match about man's guilt and how humanity has brought this upon ourselves? Do we self-righteously condemn those who do not get it? By now you have probably guessed I am not going to suggest that course of action.

First, we respond with compassion. Yes, we have brought this upon the cosmos by our willful sin, but God has not ignored this problem. He did not step in and change us into robots, forcing us to enter into a relationship with him. Instead he has offered redemption through the gift of his Son Jesus Christ. There will come a day when all of creation will be restored and things like earthquakes and tsunamis will be long forgotten. Those who are in Christ Jesus will return to Eden as it was always intended to be (Revelation 21-22). Because God has been gracious in Christ Jesus, we are to embody that compassion in every situation - Haiti is no exception. Disciples of Jesus are responding with great compassion to this tragedy and we must continue to do so long after those who mock our faith have forgotten the plight of the Haitians. (If you want to know how you can help Haiti, go to our website, <http://www.greentreechurch.com/news/call-for-help-in-haiti-by-drew-smith/>.)

Secondly, we must continue to share the gospel of Jesus for salvation to all of mankind. We are representatives of God's grace to this generation and, regardless of how people respond to the message, we cannot deviate from the truth about Jesus who said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Scripture is clear that God offers salvation, but there will also come a day of judgment for each one of us (Hebrews 9:27). God is as just as he is merciful and if we continue to refuse his grace, he will call us to account for our sins (Revelation 20:11ff). Our biggest problem is not physical danger, but that our everlasting existence could be spent in complete separation from God in unmitigated suffering. Ironically, in Revelation 6 where John paints the picture of Jesus' return to redeem his followers and defeat his enemies, those who have lived in rebellion against him hope for a natural disaster in order that they would escape having to face Jesus face to face.

¹²When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and

from the wrath of the Lamb, ¹⁷for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

Finally, I would urge all disciples of Jesus not to retreat from this issue. We are called to declare that Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords AND he has called us to engage with our world in compassion and truth. We must hold both of these calls with equal importance lest we become idle in good works or arrogant in attitude. Humility is the mark of Jesus' disciples. Unconditional love should be our defining characteristic. Our Lord became a servant even to death in order to save us (Philippians 2). Will we not revel in the opportunity to be the instruments of grace in his hands during our lifetime?

Haiti serves as a reminder, not of what happens to those we consider more sinful or that God is incapable or negligent of his creation. Rather, Haiti reminds us that the time for salvation is today. The work is at hand - in Haiti and in our own backyards. We must follow our Lord and Savior faithfully wherever he brings opportunity for us to share his truth in both word and deed. May God equip us to do just that!

Only by His Grace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

James Wood, "Between God and a Hard Place," *The New York Times*, 24 January 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/24/opinion/24wood.html>

[Greentree Community Church](#)