

Human Suffering and Faith in God, and how to Respond to Those Who Are Crying Out.

Written by ©The Rev. Timothy C. Geoffrion, Ph.D.



People who are suffering from the Nargis Cyclone, the typhoon in the Philippines, and other disasters need Christians to stand with them, to cry with them, to encourage them and to help them with practical needs. Most of all they need our caring presence. We need to be humble enough to admit that we do not always know the reasons why God allows such suffering. Rather, we know we can go to God for comfort and strength to handle the great trial.

Below are Tim's edited lecture notes from 2006 that addresses some of these issues. This 3 hour class was for a church audience, and so it is not very academic. I hope you find it worthwhile to read and share with others.

"Where is God in natural disasters and human suffering?"

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Timothy C. Geoffrion, Ph.D.

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In speaking of the end times, Jesus said to his disciples: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. –Luke 21:10-11 (NIV)

Is that what's going on? Are we on the brink of the end of the world?

I'm not going to be able to answer for you today. But what we can address is the phenomena of natural disasters and human suffering, which are as old as history. The subject is an important one, because most of us are very distressed emotionally and spiritually when we experience the kinds of tragedies we've been experiencing, seeing hundreds of thousands of innocent people suffer loss and death. When tragedy strikes, we often cry out to God, "Why?" "Where were you?" "Why didn't you stop the devastation and loss of human life?"

This seminar is designed to help Christians try to reflect on these horrific and troubling events, without resorting to apocalyptic proclamations, and to consider how to best respond to them.

Overview of day

Introduction: The Theological Problem of Human Suffering
Competing Philosophical and Religious Interpretations
Biblical Hope in Human Suffering
Recommendations for Thoughtful Christians—how to best respond

Introduction—The Theological Problem of Human Suffering

"Where is God in natural disasters and human suffering?" This is a profound question, which theologians and philosophers have answered differently over the centuries. It's a thorny subject, both from an intellectual point of view and from an experiential point of view.

After September 11, 2001 (when planes were crashed into the World Trade Center) many people seemed to take comfort by believing that "God is in control." I think they meant, "This has all happened according to God's will." But is that true? In what sense was and is God in control? And if God is in control, does that make God a good god or bad god?

After the Tsunami horror, about a year ago, the level of national anguish was so high that even the secular media grappled with troubling theological issues. For example, The Wall Street Journal ran a special article, entitled, "When Faith Is Tested" (Friday, January 7, 2005, W1, 10). The article showed how death and devastation like we have just witnessed poses a serious test of faith for many people, because they cannot believe or accept that a good God, a loving God, could be indifferent to human suffering, or worse, could have somehow been the author of it.

In a similar way, every time a child or loved one dies prematurely, a child is kidnapped, a woman is raped, the question of the sovereignty of God is raised. Did God intentionally make this happen, or was it out of God's control? And if God is not responsible, who or what is? Humans? Chance? Aliens?

From the standpoint of world religions and philosophy, there are many different beliefs about God, God's involvement and/or responsibility, and human responsibility in natural disasters and in their aftermath. Contrary to what is often suggested in our modern culture, all religions are not basically the same and they do not all believe in the same god. However, as we go through a number of the key alternatives, you will note some overlap, especially in the western religions—Judaism, Islam and Christianity—which should not be surprising because they all have their origins in the God of Abraham.

Competing Philosophical and Religious Interpretations I cannot possibly do justice to every major world religion in a short seminar, partly because of time and partly because I have not

devoted my life to studying other religions in great depth. But before we focus on a biblical response to human suffering, which is the main focus of our time together, a thumbnail sketch of some competing philosophical and religious interpretations will create a backdrop for our upcoming discussion.

Eastern religions

Hindus believe in reincarnation and karma, i.e., what you do in one life will be rewarded or punished in the subsequent life. Hindus might tend to understand any particular disaster as bad karma, the consequence of wrong living in a previous life. Conversely, through the prayers of the people, there is the possibility of being reincarnated to a better life, in which case the Tsunami as done them a favor.

Theravada Buddhists do not generally believe in a personal god, while Mahayana Buddhists believe in the spirit of Buddha. The great aspiration of Buddhists is to become enlightened and to escape the cycle of reincarnation. Human suffering is part and parcel of this life, and they may not look for any other particular explanation for the death and devastation of the Tsunami. As with all suffering, Buddhist are likely to advise that one detach oneself from the mental and emotional reactions humans are prone to make in such circumstances. (This response reminds me a little of the Stoics of Jesus' day.)

So-Called "New Age" Groups

New Agers do not represent one alternative religion. Rather, "new age" is a catchall term that describes any number of different individuals and groups. In one form or another, New Agers draw on an eclectic mix of eastern religions, astrology, ancient cults and practices, sometimes Wicca. They tend to be very "spiritually" oriented, but rather than look to the Bible or any major world religious tradition for guidance, they construct their own hodgepodge of beliefs and practices—looking to religious experiences, spiritual guides, old souls, mediums, the stars, Mother Earth, etc. for "truth."

Among New Age adherents are those who want us to transcend all particular religions and competing conceptions of God in order to find a meeting place in love, compassion, sharing and giving. A new age answer to the horrors of natural disaster might be that we need to stop fighting over religious dogma and learn to love more and pray more to send positive vibrations throughout the universe.

Deepak Chopra, for example, told Larry King in response to the Tsunami: that he sees God as all the forces of the world combined, "the forces of creation, the forces of protection and the forces of destruction." What we need, according to Chopra, is to be more in touch with Earth (Gaia) and quiet the turbulence of the world by collective action. (See Deepak Chopra's interview by Larry King, 1/7/05)

Thus, the focus of this approach to human suffering is not to look at the cause as much as to look to ways we can bind together to create a more loving, peaceful, balanced world, in the hope that our action will influence the forces of Nature.

God-less views

Deists, such as Thomas Jefferson, believe in a God as a type of clock winder. God created the world, set things into motion, and let happen whatever happens. Thus, a Deist today might say that God had nothing to do with what happened. It's nature gone awry for one reason or another.

An agnostic and an atheist would come to a similar ending point as the Deist, even though agnostics believe we can't know anything for sure about "God," and atheists don't believe in God at all. The common denominator of them all is that in disaster they will not look to God but to chance or human beings both for blame and for hope.

Whether there is a God or not, what matters is what humans do or don't do. We're on our own. We'd do well to accept that and act accordingly, they might say.

Western religions

Judaism

Religious Jews tend to believe that God is sovereign and gives life and takes it away. It is up to God to make such decisions about who lives, who dies, and when these things take place.

On the other hand, there are some modern day Jews, such as Rabbi Kushner, who teach that God suffers with us and is basically powerless to control human affairs. We may look to God as sympathetic support, but not as a force that causes suffering or stops it.

Islam

Muslims tend to regard everything that happens in life as the will of Allah (or "God") to which they must submit, a response that is fundamental to their understanding of a proper relationship with God. In such situations, God may be punishing people or has reasons that are beyond human comprehension. But no matter. If Allah wills it, so be it.

Christianity

Christians, Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, tend to fall into one of three camps.
1. With the traditional Jew and Muslim, many Christians believe that God is completely

sovereign, meaning that nothing happens without his approval, if not direct action. Thus, what happened in the Tsunami was the will of God in some way, and should be accepted as such, as painful and fearful as it is. It may be that God allowed this disaster to wake us up and call us to repentance; or that there is some other mysterious purpose that we have to discern or may never figure out.

Focus: God is responsible.

2. Other Christians, confine God's sovereignty to matters of salvation, and consider that much of what happens in the natural world is subject to forces separate from God. Within God's sovereignty, he has carved out a sphere of freedom, according to this view. As a result, we now live in a world that is contaminated by intentional and unintentional rebellion against God (i.e., sin), and even nature is out of whack because of it. (Paul taught that God subjected nature to decay, perhaps in response to human sin. See Romans 8:19-22.)

God, then, is not the author of the disaster, but is at work offering redemption from sin. The Christian hope is that some day not only will humans be freed from all sin and suffering, but nature will be restored as well. In the meantime, God remains our best resource to go for help, comfort and hope in the face of our suffering.

Focus: God may have some responsibility; but natural forces and humans do, too.

3. Still other Christians completely leave aside the role of God in natural disaster and human suffering. Instead, they focus almost exclusively on the role of human beings, both in causing human distress and in alleviating it. Humans may not have caused the Tsunami, but human negligence or greed or some other moral failing is responsible for the deaths and destruction. God is in those who respond to the disaster by helping others.

Focus: Humans must take responsibility.

The angry, distraught and confused

Then there are those who, regardless of the official position of their religion, are calling into question whatever they have been taught or have believed. They're angry, they're afraid, they're devastated.

Some jump to the conclusion that God must not be good if he/she allowed this to happen. Others have suddenly become atheists, because they can't imagine a good God allowing this to happen. (Some, I imagine, have become atheists in name only. They actually believe in God, but they are so angry at him/her that they are willing to fool themselves into thinking they don't believe in God; they don't know how else to strike back on a subconscious level.)

For many others, they are just plain confused. This disaster is prompting them to ask theological questions they have never had before. They want answers, but they just don't know what to think or to believe.

Biblical Hope in Human Suffering

For our purposes today, let's look at one brief, well known, passage in the New Testament that addresses the issue of God's role in human experience as a source of hope in the midst of tragedy and suffering.

Romans 8:28-31

- God is constantly at work in the lives of those who love him—whether through difficult, unplanned circumstances or through deliberate spiritual disciplines (8:28).
- God's sovereignty means he is orchestrating the outcomes of our life's experiences for our good (8:28). Paul doesn't say God plans everything that happens, but that God works all things that happen together for good. So he doesn't answer the question of human freedom or how certain things come to happen or even whose responsibility certain experiences are. He says God works whatever happens for good.
- And whose good? (8:28) The good of those who love God and are called according to God's purpose. God's good working here is focused on believers who are called according to his purpose, a sign of which is that they love him. [This is not a statement about those who don't love him, or about our taking credit for loving him. Human free will and responsibility are not the subjects. God and God's activity are the subjects.]
- And what is that good? (8:29-30) God's goal is not to accomplish our agenda, but his purposes—to help us become more and more like his son, Jesus Christ. When God works in us according to his purposes for us, that is "good" for us. In fact, I'm sure Paul would say, that is the best possible good for us.
- And what does it mean that God is for us? (8:31) No one and nothing can ultimately thwart God from accomplishing his good purposes in our life.
- What about "bad" things that happen to us all the time, some of our own making and some well beyond our control? Paul is not addressing those situations here. There are other passages that detail the misery humans bring on themselves due to their choices. The teaching here on the sovereign activity of God is intended to reassure believers that God's ultimate plan for each of us cannot be thwarted. We are secure in God's hands—not protected from the hardships of this world, but assured of getting all the way home.

Personal story closer to home.

My mother suffered from Alzheimer's for at least 15 years. She couldn't even open her eyes, let alone talk or relate to those around her. How could God possibly work her situation for her good? I couldn't answer that easily. But I chose to trust that ultimately, even Alzheimer's disease cannot thwart God's good purposes for my mother's life. Her earthly life and consciousness appeared to be finished, even though her heart kept beating; but I trusted that ultimately her life was being kept safely in God's hands for eternity. I trusted that there would be a better day for her, and in the meantime, I remained open to seeing what good God may produce in my life through her ongoing condition and our suffering with her.

For further biblical study:

Please see Romans 5:1-8; 8:19-27, 28-31;
2 Corinthians 1:3-4; Hebrews 2:18; 4:16-17.

Recommendations for Thoughtful Christians

In the face of our intense emotional reactions and the various alternative beliefs and philosophies available to us in the world, we need to create a constructive strategy to get our bearings.

1. First, try to separate your emotional distress from your thinking about God. Your violent reaction is a sign that something is wrong—people died, children orphaned, and lives and livelihoods were ruined; but don't jump to the conclusion that the fault lies with God. Grief and distress, even anger, are appropriate emotional responses to tragedy; but thinking about God requires thoughtful reflection outside of the realm of emotional reaction.
2. Second, be open to faith in the midst of a lack of understanding. By giving up on the search for truth, you almost guarantee that you will not find it. To continue to search for the truth, as seemingly impossible as the quest may seem, is to leave open the possibility that you may find it; or it may find you!

[William James, the famous psychologist and philosopher of the 19th century wrote a penetrating essay, entitled, "The Will to Believe." In it he challenges the empiricists, those who require physical or scientific proof for their beliefs, by pointing out that in the realm of spiritual truth, faith is required. If they rule out the knowledge that can be only gained by first believing, they guarantee that they will never believe. In other words, though we may never know and understand everything about God or life, choosing to put our faith in God is an important first step in coming to understand more than you could understand without faith. As Augustine first formulated, "faith seeks understanding." Theologians through the centuries add to that, "and faith makes understanding more possible."]

3. Third, decide where you are going to go for knowledge about God. One source is not as good as another in light of the fact that there are vastly different views about God and God's activity in the world. Will you put your trust in the Christian Bible? The Koran? The Hebrew Scriptures? The Vedas or Hindu Scriptures? Will you reject any notion of a personal God and turn to Buddhist writings or humanistic

philosophies of deists, agnostics or atheists? Or will you trust your own intuition and your own theological interpretation of your experience? How about astrologers and spirit guides? How will you decide?

To throw up your hands because you're overwhelmed at all the choices or because you think it is useless to try to discover the truth is to make a different type of choice. You've heard it said, "to not decide is to decide." You may need some help from your pastor or teachers to sort out these different views of God; but it is a worthwhile endeavor. (In philosophical terms, the quest for truth and examining how we know what we know is called epistemology.)

4. Fourth, if you believe in God, it is helpful to acknowledge our limited ability to explain God or a natural disaster. If God exists, God is certainly greater than any of us and exceeds our ability to fully understand. Holy Scripture, at least in the Christian tradition, portrays God as personal, just, loving, merciful and active in the life of those who seek him. Contrary to the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, the God of the Bible is not immoral, selfish, or prone to do dirty tricks on humans. The Bible then can relieve some of our anxiety about whether or not God is trustworthy and for us or not. However, it cannot help us understand everything that happens in human experience. We will always be left with some question marks. Ultimately the theodicy question (how can a good God, if omnipotent and omniscient, allow evil and 'innocent' human suffering?) cannot be answered.

5. Fifth, what else is available to us? We cannot change the past, and it is unlikely we can ever fully explain what happened. But we have today, and we may seek God in the present. According to the Christian teaching in the Bible, God offers a personal, loving relationship with those who put their faith in him and accept his Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. God offers redemption from our failings and hope for our eternity; but on God's terms, not ours. Seek to be a positive presence in the world.

Something to hang on to

Based on my own study of religion, philosophy and Christianity in particular, I have come to some tentative conclusions that I find helpful. The Bible offers a number of different possible causes for human suffering: natural consequences of human wrongdoing to themselves or others, God's punishment for wrongdoing, God's training or discipline of those he loves, and a situation that God intends to use to bring God honor and glory somehow (e.g. John 9). But sometimes things happen that we can't easily tie to any particular human or divine source, such as a Tsunami. Natural disasters and freak accidents are the hardest events to explain theologically or accept emotionally.

In such circumstances, the most fruitful response I know when a human tragedy has gotten my attention, is to talk to God about it and work for a constructive response. Specifically:

1. I allow myself to feel the horror over the destruction of human life, and I let myself be reminded that this life is temporary, uncertain and sometimes dangerous.

2. I allow myself to pour out my anguish, my anger, my grief, my fear or whatever else I may be feeling to God, as the Psalmists often did. God can handle it, and we often need to let the feelings out, before transformation can take place.

3. I pray to be able to make most of today and that I will invest myself in things that truly matter and last for eternity.

4. I admit that I cannot possibly fully grasp God's role in human suffering, because I as a finite, mortal being, I cannot expect to fully understand the infinite, Creator and Sustainer of the Universe.

5. I realize that at some point I have to choose how I will attempt to relate to God in the face of human suffering. Will I remain disappointed, hurt, afraid, angry, and filled with doubt? Or, will I choose to trust the God of the Bible, which tells me that I can trust—not for health, wealth and freedom from suffering, but for my eternal salvation.

6. I actively engage God in prayer. I reach out to God for comfort, perspective, strength and hope when the suffering touches me directly; and I pray for others when it touches them.

7. I seek to be part of the solution as I can and feel I should. I ask God for wisdom and grace to respond in ways that reflect his sacrificial love and service, which Jesus modeled in his life and death.

Conclusion

Scripture offers many reasons for human suffering, but in our hearts and minds, we struggle terribly when innocent people get hurt and die. While we are not given all the answers we would like, we are encouraged to trust that God is good and that God is actively at work in the world for the good of those who love him, according to his purposes. We may not have the option of fully understanding, but we do have the opportunity to reach out to God in trust to learn, to grow, and receive grace and help in our time of distress and need.

Personal Application

- How are you responding to the suffering of the world and in your own life?

- What are you thinking about God?

- How are your responses affecting your relationship with God?
- How do you plan to sort through the various beliefs, opinions and issues in order to reach a constructive viewpoint and response?
- What are you going to take away from this seminar?