

***Give us Faith So We'll Be Safe
A Theological and Pastoral Response
to the Tragedy in Haiti***

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How do we who call ourselves followers of the Lord of Life respond to the chilling report that “40,000 bodies have been buried and there could be 200,000 dead in Haiti”? That paralyzing news is what we heard from the report of Shepherd Smith of Fox News on this date.¹ The earthquake in Haiti that has shaken the tiny Caribbean nation to death is also shaking our consciences and our souls with questions.

Many are asking the great existential questions about God even as the Church is already deploying people with help and hope in His Name. There are some who are wondering about the eternal questions of God and His goodness and children trapped under five stories of concrete. Some very prominent Christians have already made theological assessments of the situation and have ascribed judgment as a result of a pact with the devil. There is, quite frankly, and quite Biblically, no place for theological speculation in the midst of catastrophic human suffering. And any response that does not, first and foremost, identify with the suffering is convoluted and out of touch with the spirit of the Christ who walked this earth and ministered to the poor. Indeed, theological speculation about why God allowed the earthquake in Haiti by a well-known preacher is astonishingly distant from the spontaneous response of an anonymous Haitian clergyman that I witnessed on television today.

The scene before me was haunting, the kind of scene that is etched into one’s mind forever, even though I was watching it from the safety of my living room. The scene was this: there were hundreds of Haitians, cramped together in airline waiting areas of the Miami International Airport weeping and wailing, some beating their breasts, and others even on the floor crying out, as they received reports of their lost loved ones. But this is what got me: suddenly the camera shifted to a man, a Haitian minister, who stood up and began seeking to lead the weeping people in a hymn, singing out in Creole. The minister led the weeping unplanned congregation with a bold voice of hope in God in the mist of the wailing. Without casting any stones on those who would prefer to cry, “Judgment,” I must say that the anonymous minister looks much more like the prophet and the Savior in the passages that follow than the more prominent Christian leader who has drawn the attention.

¹ Friday, January 15, 2010

But as I watched the broken-hearted people being led in singing their “doxology in the darkness” I could not help but think, “What an amazing response! Only the Spirit of Jesus Himself could do something like this in the human spirit.”

So, then, what should our response be to such a tragedy? I should say, immediately, that our response should be one of pure mercy. Indeed, I have no doubt that the leader who is now infamous for his description of the historical or as some claim mythological events that led to the judgment is one of the first to send physical aid. That is, of course, our first response to any tragedy and we all pray for Haiti. We all want to give our money and our very lives to help them. Thank God for the first responders who are already there now: our military, the military of Canada and several European nations. Thank God for Doctors without Borders, and for Samaritan’s Purse, and for the countless mission agencies that specialize in this sort of ministry. Those are the first responders needed most.

But there are “first responses” that surround this horror that are not Biblical. And we need to be Biblical because only the Word will bring right-minded answers to the questions that are rising like the cries of the Haitians themselves. To be sure, the questions are not coming from the Haitians at this point. There is little time for theological reflection other than, “Help, oh God!” No, the questions are coming from Westerners who have the luxury to ask the questions. But to be fair, the questions come because the people asking them have had to come to terms with the perplexing issues of God’s love and preachers talking about God’s sovereignty and the presence of tragedy in their own lives. The earthquake and the misery just bring back memories of the breast cancer or the call about your teenager at 3 AM, or the child you lost in the womb. So let’s face the questions for there are answers.

It may not seem that the answer would come from a besieged city over 1,500 years ago. But in Lamentations God does give us an answer. So will you turn your questions to the Bible, to selections from Lamentations in the Old Testament and then in the New Testament, from Luke chapter 15.

This is the very Word of God.

My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city (Lamentations 2:11, NIV).

I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. So I say, “My splendour is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD.” I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, “The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.” The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD (Lamentations 3:17-26, NIV).

For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men. To crush underfoot all prisoners in the land, to deny a man his rights before the Most High, to deprive a man of justice—would not the Lord see such things? Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD (Lamentations 3:31-40, NIV).

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (Luke 13:1-5, NIV).

Let us pray.

Lord, You are an unshakable tower of strength for men of flesh living and dying in a world like this. Help us to find shelter in Thee for our lives, and to be ambassadors of Your truth to this broken world, a truth that will heal and a truth that will comfort, through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen.

Introduction

I was preaching at the Cedar Falls Bible Conference in Northern Iowa when it happened. As the Conference director began his opening statement, “Something horrible has happened in Minneapolis” people began to race out the door, cell phones in hand, fingers pressing numbers, mouths gaping open. And the feeling that night was similar to the feeling I had on 9/11. Living as we do on the ever-present brink of terror strikes just seems to make everyone hollow inside when such things happen.

On the first day after the I-35 Bridge collapsed in Minneapolis, when the concrete and steel lay on the bed of the Mississippi River, like a strange new island that had emerged out of nowhere, Bill Hemmer with Fox News looked around the scene and said, “It is unbelievable. The scene is hard to get your hands around.”

That same reporter is now being astonished at yet another disaster, I thought as I listened to him. This time he is in Haiti. And so are we. We are there through our television screens and Twitters and Facebooks and newspapers almost the second that it happened. We are there now in our prayers. And we are as a nation trying to get our mind and our heart around this as well. And increasingly we are trying to make sense of the world around us that is a very different world than it was even ten years ago. With terrorists coming into our nation trying to blow up planes over Detroit, and increasing tensions with radical Islamic fundamentalism

and now an earthquake that reminds us that we are living in a most dangerous world, natural and human, I heard someone say, “I just don’t feel safe anymore.”

There is a song that became the anthem of 9/11 that I think about during days like these—“The Prayer” with lyrics by Carole Bayer Sager:

I pray you’ll be our eyes, and watch us where we go
And help us to be wise, in times when we don’t know
Let this be our prayer, when we lose our way
Lead us to the place, guide us with your grace
To a place where we’ll be safe
I pray we’ll find your light
And hold it in our hearts
When stars go out each night
Let this be our prayer
When shadows fill our day
Lead us to a place
Guide us with your grace
Give us faith so we’ll be safe
Ask that life be kind
And watch us from above
We hope each soul will find
Another soul to love
Let this be our prayer
Just like every child
Need to find a place, guide us with your grace
Give us faith so we’ll be safe²

It seems to me that if Christians don’t have a faith to share in times like these, when would we ever? And if our theology can’t sing songs of divine comfort in the midst of human suffering then we don’t have a theology worth believing. But we do. We really do.

Our faith comes from God’s Word. In 586 BC a man named Jeremiah watched as his city of Jerusalem was sacked by Babylonian hordes. He saw the most horrible of situations imaginable to him: the destruction of the House of God. Towers falling and bridges collapsing plus his people—including the priests of the Most High—being led away like captured animals.

We do not have to imagine how he felt. He felt like us. That is what Lamentations—literally, the Book of Weeping—tells us. He felt like you.

But the Book is not just reflective for our generation. It is instructive for our days. “How can we be God’s guides to those who long to be safe? How can we respond to days when the

² The next verse in Spanish is translated: (We dream of a world without violence; A world of justice and hope; Everyone giving a hand to their neighbor; Symbolizing peace and fraternity).

earth quacks and kills thousands upon thousands of human beings?

I. Share Jesus' Tears: Weep With Those Who Weep And Declare Our Pain

My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city (Lamentations 2:11, NIV).

We have an expression "I cried my eyes out" and this is what Jeremiah meant when he said, "My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within." Weep with others over their loss. We may want to weep for ourselves. We are told by Paul not to weep as those who have no faith, but we are never forbidden to go to God with our pain. In fact, Joseph did. David did. I have and you have. We weep for the presence of evil and pain in the world.

Our Savior was a weeping man, a "man of sorrows acquainted with grief." And the shortest verse in the Bible seems to me to be shouting out something about our Savior. The shortest verse is: "*Jesus wept.*"

In Jesus Christ, God has identified with Man to the staggering degree that the Almighty cries like a widow at the sight of death the sorrow it brings.

To mourn is not dishonorable, it is human. In fact, to weep is *divine*.

And another thing here: this man who told them that judgment was coming is now the man who cries out to God on their behalf. Just like Christ convicts you of your sin, He then becomes your advocate before the Lord.

"The rain falls on the just and the unjust." Sometimes I may know that someone is dying because of the judgment against his or her sin. But there is no need to announce it.

Years ago, Jackson Browne wrote a song called "These Days." One of the lines went like this:

"These days I sit on corner stones; And count the time in quarter tones to ten, my friend; *Don't confront me with my failures; I had not forgotten them [my emphasis].*³

When people are hurting they need someone to come along beside them and just experience their pain with them, not remind them of it, or explain why it has come upon them. Just be there. Cry if you need to.

That is the kind of Savior we have in Jesus. And so if we are His, those are the kinds of people we want to become.

³ Jackson Browne, "These Days" from the recording "For Everyman," Copyright 1973 Jackson Browne.

Here is a second lesson from Jeremiah for all of us as we watch the calamity before us in Haiti:

II. Share Jesus' Truth: Console Those Who Mourn By Proclaiming The Attributes Of God

Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men" (Lamentations 3:31-33).

Jeremiah was moved to proclaim God's attributes of love as he looked around at the devastation of his people. It is important to remember this, as we connect that passage to our lives today: Theology—the study of God—is *never esoteric* in the Word of God. It is *never academic*. Theology is *never removed from life*. It is always a "faith for living." And thus the prophet looks to the very nature of God to find meaning and comfort.

The classic hymn "Great is Thy Faithfulness" is taken from this great third chapter of Lamentations.

It is interesting to note, first, that we learn the most about God's attributes in the midst of pain and sorrow. Jeremiah said, "I will remember them." A confrontation with national tragedy causes us all to look to God and when we do we will discover His great attributes.

We are consoled with God's Sovereignty. But also we are consoled with God's great love. It is not one or the other. God is sovereign. God is good. Had you come upon Jeremiah when he spoke of the absolute sovereignty of God you might have set up a church based just on that. Or if you came by when Jeremiah said, "He does not willingly afflict the children of men" you might have split off and started a new church. But he said both.

"But how can both attributes exist? How can God be both sovereign in the face of calamity and yet He is good and loving to humanity?" Because He is both. "But that doesn't make sense!" Whose sense?

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).

At the cross, God's sovereignty and God's goodness meet. For the place of deicide, the murder of God by Men, became the place of delight, where sinners are redeemed. The cross is the place where God's attributes come to the forefront of human experience at one time. Christ, the Son of God, became sin, became abandoned by God the Father, as He was pinned with Roman nails to the executioner's cross, to the far extremes of human suffering to identify with us in our suffering. And when others taunted Him to use His power to overcome the evil, He did not. He endured the suffering. He did so for us. Thus sovereign power to overwhelm evil and God's love for us all came together. And the earth shook. And the daytime sky went black. It is inexplicable except for the love of God.

The cross of Jesus is the place to take your inexplicable pain.

Minutes after the I-35 bridge collapsed several years ago, one woman began to pray. Then others joined her. The image was amazing: people calling on a sovereign and a good God in the face of catastrophe; just like broken-hearted Haitians singing to Christ about His amazing grace in the face of unimaginable loss. But Christ and His love is our only hope in such times.

Finally, when horror like the horror of Haiti happens, when tragedy strikes in your own life:

III. Seek Jesus' Teaching in Your Own Life: Examine Yourself As You Seek Meaning In The Midst Of Despair

Jeremiah did this. Jeremiah wept with those who wept. He rested in God's attributes. And then he said:

Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD
(Lamentations 3:40).

It is very much like Jesus in the New Testament. Look at it.⁴ There was an atrocity brought to Jesus to see what he would do with it. Note as I read again that Jesus answers, like a good Rabbi, with a question. He knows that they see life as "sin and get zapped;" and "do good and be blessed." But life is more complicated than that. So Jesus ups the ante and brings up another case—another calamity. It is not a bridge collapsing but a tower. He tells us clearly that these did not die because they were worse sinners. He does not explain. But he calls us to see that calamity and tragedy in this life become visible reminders of what happens when we ignore the brevity of life and that there are eternal consequences to our relationship with Jesus Christ today. Jesus is calling for each and every one of us to examine our lives and our relationship with Him as we witness bridges collapsing. What do we see?

First, we live in a world under the influence of sin.

Sin has enslaved all of creation to the principle of entropy (Romans 8:19-23) Sin, then, affects even innocent lives. And we can be alive one moment and in eternity the next.

Secondly, we must be ready, in every season of life, to leave this world and to meet God. The earthquake that hit Haiti last about 30 seconds. And in that time hundreds of thousands of souls left this planet. But even as I write, even more, all over the world, will suddenly pass from this world into the presence of the Creator. Are we ready to go? For the brevity of life is

⁴ Now there were some present at that time that told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:1-5, NIV).

ever before us, beckoning, calling, crying that we turn to the Lord while there is time. Jesus also calls for us to repent, to examine ourselves and to turn to Him.

For God will punish unrepentant sin.

Again, it is not a time to point fingers in judgment at people Haiti. It is not time to think we can explain it all. But it is a time to pray for them, and to weep for them, and to realize again the brevity of life and that I will soon stand before God myself. It is a time to recall that every horror here reminds us of the horror of being separated forever from God. It is a time *for me* to turn again to God and repent.

IV. Fourth, there is hope for all of us in Jesus Christ if we turn to Him in faith.

There is hope for families in our nation. There is hope that we may experience national revival. There is hope that maybe because we live in such times of terror, there can come good between God and Man in Christ.

Jeremiah moved to a place of self-examination.

So, must you. Christ is teaching us to use every opportunity in this life, the good and the horrible, to examine our lives in the presence of His holiness and in light of the fact that we will all soon stand before Almighty God.

Conclusion

What have we learned from Jeremiah's Lamentations?

1. Share Jesus' Tears: Weep With Those Who Weep
2. Share Jesus' Truth: Console Those Who Mourn With God's Attributes
3. Seek Jesus' Teaching *For Your Own Life*: Examine And Explore The Meaning For Our Lives
4. There is hope for all of us when we turn to Jesus Christ.

We have seen images in recent days that we will never forget. Even today the President of the United States warned our nation that we no doubt see scenes of inhumanity that will not only bring us sorrow, but even outrage and horror. But I believe we will also see images of courage. The human spirit, created by God, can rise to heights of great heroism.

In the Oklahoma bombing from several years ago there was striking image on the front page: a picture of a fireman cradling a burned child in his arms. The caption under the photograph read, "An Oklahoma City firefighter tenderly carries a child injured in the explosion."

Remember that? Wasn't that a picture of Jesus Christ in the midst of our catastrophes of life? I thought about that very scene as I watched that minister leading broken Haitians in

singing “Amazing Grace” in Creole. They were singing to God in the mist of their catastrophe. What a response.

At Calvary the earth shook, the sky went black in daytime, and the sins of the world came down like millions of pounds of Haitian concrete buildings on Jesus Christ. And those defective concrete buildings are our sins—my sin, your sin, the sins of our fathers and our mothers. Those concrete buildings were built with a fault line running through them as deep as the wickedness in the human heart. The collapse of this gigantic building of sin was more horrendous than even that which the earthquake brought in Haiti. Christ was crushed under the weight of this sin on that hill outside of Jerusalem.

But from the twisted thorns of His crown, and the cold slab of his tomb, Jesus Christ rose again. And He is alive. And He comes in our tragedy, to rescue us from the ruin and the rubble of the sin of our lives and bring us to safety. Oh that we could cry out to those under the rubble of Haitian concrete and under the ruin of human sin in our own families, “*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art there...*”

You see all of us are burned in one way or another. All of us have experienced the devastation that sin brings into our lives, even if it is just living in a world where children die, and young women get breast cancer, and good and godly men and women are killed in accidents; or, where poor nations, already pounded by hurricanes and haunted by ungodly religions and hurt by unscrupulous dictators. All of us live in a nation where wickedness is becoming commonplace and the innocent are becoming the victims. Yet we learn in Jeremiah that we have a faithful God whose mercies are new every morning. Let it be that in this time of national catastrophe, we once again turn in repentance and faith to the faithful God of Jeremiah, our God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this time of such massive lamentable loss, when questions mount in our minds like the sorrow in our hearts, where do we go? Where else? Where else could we turn but to a Savior of whom it was written, “*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...*” (53:4a).

He walks among us today. He walks among the dying and the wounded of Haiti. He is not removed from that place. He is there. And He is with you if you will but look to Him at this very moment.

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