

What role does God play when disaster strikes?

Devastation like that in Haiti can be immensely productive, giving the world the opportunity to do the good works to which God has called us.

By The Rev. Paul Viggiano

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After taking a special offering for the Haiti earthquake, a gentleman exiting the church paused. "Doesn't God cause earthquakes?" he asked. "Yes," I nodded. "Then why are we praying and raising money if this is what God has determined to happen?"

Good question. Let's consider some options:

Atheists generally offer a bald scientific explanation to events like earthquakes. "There is no need to bring God into the equation," they suggest. "It's merely the shifting of tectonic plates."

But why do the plates shift? Why is the world made in such a way and by whom? Any child pushing to the infinite regress of such an answer leaves those relying on science frustrated at their limitations — let alone seeking to define an event as tragic and not merely the necessary results of a big bang whose latest major episode was on stage at Port-au-Prince.

Others ascent to a God who didn't want an earthquake, but couldn't do anything about it. God, according to this view, began the world but has limited involvement. He's like an insurance company that sells a policy then sends an adjuster to restore the damaged goods after the house has burned down.

This God is not ever-present and there is no telling when He might show up or what He might do. As one who has suffered great sorrow, I find this view of God neither biblical nor comforting. He's the fair-weather God who has chosen to leave us on our own.

Most believe in a God who doesn't really want earthquakes but merely allows them. He is the likable, somewhat harmless God desiring the best for everybody, permitting awful things to happen then promising to the make the most of it. This God is the master of damage control. Somehow, someday, we'll see that God did something good as a result of the earthquake.

One major weakness in this approach is that there is no telling when God actually starts repairing the problem. How good does the event have to be before we realize that God, the fixer of problems, has arrived? There is no telling when, or if, God is at work at all.

Another more biblical, honoring and highly consoling view of God in the midst of catastrophe is one which recognizes that God has His own holy, just and glorious purposes for every last single event in the course of human history - whether joyful or tragic. This knowledge may not make all the sorrow disappear, but it does rescue hearts from despair.

The 16th-century reformer John Calvin challenged his congregation to understand "that ignorance of providence is the greatest of all miseries, and the knowledge of it results in the highest happiness." Calvin explained that it is an insult to God to suggest "that man stands exposed to every blind and random stroke of fortune referring to the misery which man should feel, were he placed under the dominion of chance." In short, the earthquake in Haiti wasn't just bad luck.

Many in clerical robes seize these opportunities to speak of God's judgment in the face of earthquakes. But since the last prophet died some 2,000 years ago, we're simply not privy to such information.

So what good purpose could God have for tragic events He ordains?

The disciples of Jesus once asked Him why a certain man had been born blind — was it his sin or the sins of his parents? He answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him." God works in the hearts of men through tragedy; sometimes that's just what it takes.

The Scriptures teach that God appoints the day of prosperity as well as the day of adversity. The Scriptures teach of God bringing famines to pass that people might know where to go for eternal food. Much is said of Jesus, the calmer of storms. But the Scriptures also teach that Jesus is the raiser of storms as well.

Christ is the master catechizer and all the earth is His classroom. His instruction revolves around Himself as man's sole help in heaven and earth.

Devastation like that in Haiti can be immensely productive, giving the world the opportunity to do the good works to which God has called us. It can also be supremely redemptive, as we pray that eternal healing becomes a primary issue in the hearts of those in the midst of calamity.

God doesn't merely make the best of a bad situation; the bad situation itself has a holy design. Think of the arch crime of history, the crucifixion of Christ; it was the darkest and, at the same time, the most glorious event in the history of creation.

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