

are to repent, knowing the we deserve the same, or worse, and that it is only by God's grace that we are spared and given another day. God's purpose is always repentance, that we are sorry for our sins and at the same time trust the promise that our sins are forgiven through Jesus death on the cross.

The flesh reacts just the opposite when tragedy strikes. It rises up in pride and anger against God and cries, "How could You let this happen?" The sinful flesh thinks that it deserves a life of peace with no suffering, but faith knows better. We deserve nothing that the Lord gives. May God grant that tragedies, big and small, always lead us to repentance and not a hardened heart, to humility and not pride, that we may receive His visitation with meekness and faith.

### **Testing Faith and Love**

Dr. Luther teaches us this about suffering:

We should be comforted by our certainty that it is God's punishment sent upon us not only to punish sin but also to test our faith and love- our faith in order that we may see and know what our attitude is toward God, and our love in order that we may see what our attitude is toward our neighbor. (Luther: Letters of Spiritual Council, ed. Theodore Tappert, Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, BC. 1955. p. 237)

Luther reminds us that catastrophe and disaster are a test of our faith toward God and our love toward our neighbor.

Instead of fear and despair, disaster should provoke and strengthen our faith in God. Job is our example. After he had lost almost everything (including his ten children) his wife says, "Do you still hold to your integrity? Curse God and die!" But Job does not let disaster drive him from God. He responds to his wife, "Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept evil?" [Job 2:9-10] Job's disaster doesn't silence his prayers but amplifies them; it doesn't quench his faith but strengthens it.

Luther also notes that catastrophe is a test of our

love, providing opportunities to love our neighbors. James writes, "If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warm and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?" [James 2:15-16]

We rejoice that catastrophes provide us the opportunity to help our neighbors in time of need, to clothe the naked, feed the hungry and tend to the sick. Faith always works in love for the neighbor, keeping the law, "Love your neighbor as yourself." [Leviticus 19:18] Faith looks upon the neighbor's need as an opportunity to love and give.

Thus disaster provides the opportunity for us to confess our faith and God and to show our love for our neighbor.

### **The Schoolhouse of Hope**

This life is full of disaster and catastrophe. We live in a veil of tears, in the valley of the shadow of death. [Psalm 23:4] In all of this, all of our struggles and tragedies, all of our sorrow and tears, all of our catastrophes and disasters and in the midst of suffering and death, in all of this we are learning to hope for heaven. This life is the schoolhouse of hope; we learn from this life to long for the life to come, to long for heaven where "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." [Revelation 21:4] In all of our suffering and pain we look to heaven and the hope that the Lord has for us there, and we cling even tighter to the sure promises that He has given us of eternal life.

May God continue to grant us His Holy Spirit, that we live evermore in faith toward Him and fervent love for one another, and in the midst of all of this world's disasters and catastrophes cling to the sure hope of eternal life in His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pastor Wolfmueller  
Saturday, Pentecost 15, 2005

## **Where is God in Disaster and Catastrophe?**

*This article was originally published in 2005 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Recent events in the Aurora movie theater draw us again to the Lord's Word for wisdom and comfort.*

The images and reports of the human suffering coming from the southern states is heartbreaking for all of us. The winds of hurricane Katrina blew in death and destruction. Hundreds, perhaps thousands dead, millions of homes destroyed, and billions of dollars in damage. Where is God in the midst of all this destruction, disaster and catastrophe?

### **The Ancient Question**

This question is an ancient one, the question of theodicy: How can an all-powerful and all-good God coexist with all the evil in the world? The answers usually shake out in two different directions, either God is not all-powerful (and therefore cannot stop evil) or God is not all-good (and therefore does not want to stop evil). Both of these are wrong. The Bible teaches that God is all-powerful:

"But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases." Psalm 115:3

Scripture also teaches that God is also all-good:

"No one is good but One, that is, God." Matthew 19:17

"Oh give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good." Psalm 136:1

So then, the question remains, where is God in the midst of evil, disaster, catastrophe and destruction?

### ***Hide and Seek with God***

Where is God? How do we find Him? And, more importantly, how do we know how He looks at us? Does He love us or hate us? If we see disaster and catastrophe as an expression of God's heart toward us, then we can only conclude that God hates us or is mad at us. But is it true that God hates us?

God is often hidden from us. "Truly You are a God, who hide Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior!" [Isaiah 45:15] This is how God is in our suffering; He is hidden, not to be found. If we go looking for God where He is hidden we will never find Him. If we ask, "Why, Lord, did this happen?" we will never find the answer, and the more we ask, the farther it seems the answer is from us. Chasing after God's hidden will only leads us closer and closer to despair.

What, then, are we to do? If we can't determine how God looks at us from the circumstance of our lives, how are we to know it? How do we know if God loves us or hates us? The answer: Jesus and His cross. This is where God has revealed Himself. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." [John 3:16] We know that God loves us because of Jesus and His death on the cross. This is the only way that we know the Father's heart.

To say it another way, if we try to determine how God feels or thinks about us in any other way than Jesus' death on the cross, the only conclusion will be that God is angry with us, that He hates us. We can never be sure of God's abounding love for us unless we fix our eyes on Jesus and our hearts on the good promises of His Gospel. [See John 1:18; 14:7-11] Jesus is the demonstration of God's love, mercy and grace toward us. Apart from Jesus all we can know of God is His anger and wrath.

If we seek to know God through the disasters

and catastrophes in this world, be they personal, national or even world-wide, we will never find Him to be a good and gracious God, but only a God of anger and wrath. So we seek to find God where He has revealed Himself: in the life and death of Jesus. There we find God who loves us even to the point of suffering and death; there we are comforted and assured that God cares for us.

We find God, not in our own suffering, but in the suffering of Jesus. Finding Jesus in the midst of suffering gives meaning to our own suffering and death, for being sure of Jesus' love for us we can endure suffering and even death to His glory. We know that in the midst of suffering and devastation that He will "never leave us or forsake us." [Hebrews 13:5]

### ***Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?***

We know that bad things happen, but do they happen to 'good people'? Are there really good people? Are we all so good and innocent that we deserve a life with no suffering? It would be more accurate to say: bad things happen to bad people. 'Bad people', that's how the Bible describes all of us. "There is none righteous, no, not one... There is none who does good, no, not one." [Romans 3:10,12] We are truly poor miserable sinners, and so we are always praying for mercy: that God would give us what we don't deserve. We deserve His wrath and punishment because of our sins, but we pray that He would not look upon our sins, but upon Christ and His cross, and spare us from what we deserve.

But there was one good person: Jesus. He was perfect and sinless. And something bad did happen to Him: He went to Jerusalem, was rejected, suffered and died. In the history of the earth, this is the only bad thing to happen to a good person. And so instead of asking, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" we should ask, "Why did a bad thing happen to the good person?" This is the right question, and we know the answer. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." [Romans 5:8]

Why did a bad thing happen to this Good Person? For us and for our salvation. He died for

us, in our place, for the remission of our sins. And this forgiveness He gives freely, as a gift. We do not deserve His grace and love and forgiveness and life and salvation and the sure hope of heaven, but He gives them to us anyhow. Here our human desire for justice is turned on its head. The Gospel is not fair; Jesus gets our sins and death, we get His righteousness and life. No, the Gospel is not fair, but it is good, and so we rejoice.

### ***The Purpose of Suffering***

In Luke 13 some people report a tragedy to Jesus, that massacre of some Galileans at the hands of Pilate. Jesus responds,

"Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." [Luke 13:2-5]

Jesus knows that we want someone or something to blame for tragedy; that catastrophe must be punishment for a particularly bad sin. This type of thinking would say, "New Orleans is being punished for all of its wickedness." Now, New Orleans is certainly a city full of wickedness, but this is the type of thinking that Jesus rejects. Were the men slaughtered by Pilate or the men crushed by the tower worse than other men? Jesus answers, "No." Were the people killed by the hurricane or left homeless by the flood waters worse sinners than everyone else? Jesus answers, "No." You cannot work backward and deduce a person's sinfulness based on the tragedies that happen to them. Job, for example, was an example of uprightness, and yet is visited with tragedy after tragedy.

While Jesus doesn't give us the reason for the tragedy, He does, however, say what we are to do when we hear of tragedy, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." [Luke 13:3,5] Whenever we see or hear of a catastrophe we