

Dealing with Disaster • Luke 13:1-5

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Read the Text

B. The Tsunami

1. Early in the morning of December 26th, a 9.3 magnitude earthquake, the 2nd largest in recorded history, struck the Indian Ocean.
2. The quake sent a huge wave against the shores of several nations, killing over a quarter million people & causing billions of dollars of damage.
3. Though 4 months have passed, 10's of thousands are still missing & now presumed dead, their bodies washed out to sea in the backflow of the tsunami, or buried under the tons of debris yet to be cleared.
4. It will be years before some of the devastated areas return to normal.
5. The outpouring of relief & assistance from around the world for the victims of the tsunami was massive.
 - a. A large number of those who contributed to the relief both financially & by going to work were Christians –
 - b. People motivated by the love & compassion of Christ.
6. While most believers were moved by compassion in response to the disaster,
7. One American woman, an atheist named Heather MacDonald, reacted to the disaster very differently.
8. Her response was to write a cynical editorial in the online news-site *Slate*.
 - a. It appeared on January 10, just 2 weeks after the tsunami, and was quickly spread far & wide across the Internet.
 - b. The title was *Send a Message to God: He has gone too far this time*.
9. I'm going to read the entire editorial to you.
 - a. Now, this isn't the kind of thing you typically hear in Church because it's an expression of unbelief, not faith.
 - b. I'd guess that most of us will find Ms. MacDonald's words to be condescending, & in some points, *offensive* as she mocks

- our faith in God.
- c. Nevertheless – we need to realize that THIS is how many of the people we meet every day think.
 - d. This is how they respond to disaster, and we need to know how to answer them.
 - e. As we find in 1 Peter 3:15 – we must always be ready to give an answer to those who ask us why we believe in Christ.

C. Our Plan for Today

1. Here's my plan this morning –
 - a. We're going to look at Heather MacDonald's editorial,
 - b. Then respond to it from a Biblical perspective.
 - c. After that we'll dig in to our text here in Luke 13 & see how Jesus said we ought to respond to disaster.
2. Before we begin, let me suggest that if what we look at today proves helpful, get a copy of the CD as a resource you can return to in the future.
3. For chances are good that *more disasters* like last December's tsunami are waiting in the wings, & in the not too distant future **YOU** will find yourself face to face with someone like Ms. MacDonald.

II. "BOYCOTT GOD"

A. The Editorial

In the wake of the tsunami disaster, it's time for believers to take a more proactive role in world events. It's time to boycott God.

Centuries of uncritical worship have clearly produced a monster. God knows that he can sit passively by while human life is wantonly mowed down, and the next day, churches, synagogues, and mosques will be filled with believers thanking him for allowing the survivors to survive. The faithful will ask him to heal the wounded, while ignoring his failure to prevent the disaster in the first place. They will excuse his unwillingness to stave off destruction with alibis and relativising, even if those excuses contradict God's other attributes, such as omnipresence or love for each individual life.

Where is God's incentive to behave? He gets credit for the good things and no blame for the bad. Former U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft is fond of thanking God for keeping America safe since 9/11; Ashcroft never asks why, if God has fended off terrorist strikes

since 9/11, he let the hijackers on the planes on the day itself. Was God caught off guard the first time around, like the U.S. government? But he is omniscient and omnipotent.

So slavishly do his worshipers flatter God that they give him credit for things he didn't even do. Let a man rape and murder a child, and it's the *man's* offense; but if someone tends to the sick or shares his wealth, it's God's hand at work. [According to the *Los Angeles Times*, a priest] rejects any suggestion that God forsook the tsunami victims, but he credits God with the subsequent charity: "You can see God in the people's response; how they're reaching out," he said.

It is a sad fact of human relations that unqualified adulation often produces from the adored one contempt and a kick in the chops, rather than gratitude and kindness. Apparently, the same applies to human-divine relations.

So, let the human race play hard to get. Imagine God's discombobulation if, after the next mass slaughter of human life, the hymns of praise and incense do not rise up. He checks the Sunday census; the pews are empty. Week after week, the churches and mosques are unattended; the usual gratitude for his not wiping out even more innocent children does not pour forth.

He starts to worry. Has he gone too far this time? Maybe he should've exercised his much heralded powers of intervention, the same powers that his erstwhile worshipers presupposed every time they prayed for him to cure a cancer victim, or get them into law school.

And so, no longer guaranteed an adoring public, he starts to make nice. He calls back avalanches poised to wipe out whole villages; he brings rain to drought-stricken communities; he cures fatally handicapped babies in the womb, or prevents such flawed conceptions before they happen. He presents tokens of his love to malaria victims and children paralyzed by auto accidents. Africa blooms with peace and prosperity.

It might not work. But the "I'm rotten-You're divine" syndrome isn't too functional, either. It's worth a try; there is nothing to lose. ^[1]

B. Response

1. Ms. MacDonald's response to the tragedy of the tsunami is a classic & tragic example of how people who have no interest in

God when things are peachy, get all worked up & blame Him when disaster strikes the Earth or catastrophe shakes their private world.

- a. They live their lives without any reference to God, ignoring Him completely.
 - b. But at the slightest hint of distress, they demand He show up & explain Himself for His failure to keep things moving along smoothly.
2. I don't know about you, but I find this to be *hypocrisy* of the highest order.
 3. If a person wants to be an atheist, then be *consistent* with it.
 - a. If you're going to live as though there is no God,
 - b. Then don't whine against Him when life throws you a curve.

 4. Many of those who react to disaster the way this article does fancy themselves to be *intellectuals*.
 5. They use their *cynicism* as a way to *reinforce* their unbelief.
 6. But if they were being consistent in their use of reason, and understood anything about what the Bible says about God, they would see the holes in their own arguments.
 7. In fact, I suspect some of them *do*, but they don't think that poor, foolish simpletons like you & I who believe in God will be able to see the fallacies in their remarks and so will be shaken in our faith.

 8. The tsunami, 9/11, natural disasters of all kinds that take the life of thousands: war, famine, pestilence & plague =
 - a. We can lump all of these under the title of *terrible tragedies*.
 - b. NO! Let's use a better label; one even atheists use – **They are Evil**.
 9. So here we are, with the age old conundrum, the very thing Heather bases her whole cynical editorial on –
 10. If God is all good and all powerful, why is there evil in the world?
 - a. This is a real problem.
 - b. But not just for the theist who believes the Bible & the Bible's God.
 - c. This is a problem for Heather & her fellow cynics.
 11. Just as she points to evil in the world & bases her rejection of God on it, I would like to pose this question to Heather: "If there is no God, then why is there evil?"

12. You see, Evil is the state of things being what they **OUGHT** not be.
- a. Human beings see things through a filter of right & wrong & declare some things *wrong!*
 - b. We judge things like tsunamis, & planes flying into buildings, & the Holocaust, as *evil*.
 - c. And we expect that other human beings who think rationally will judge them to be evil *too*.
 - d. But if there is no God, if there is no objective, unchanging standard of right & wrong, good & evil, we have *no basis* for calling these things evil.
 - e. They just are; events that take place in time & space with no meaning beyond their occurrence.
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13. In fact, we could use Heather's cynicism toward the Christian worldview right back at her.
- a. Ms. MacDonald is a secular-atheist.
 - b. If she's going to be consistent with her worldview, then she will *rejoice* at the tsunami, at 9/11, at the Holocaust, at disasters of all shapes & sizes –
 - c. Because they are effective tools for weeding the weak strains of genetic material from the human gene pool.
 - d. They are *trauma* that will force the survival of the fittest & so add momentum to the wheel of evolutionary progress.
 - e. All hail the blessed effects of Natural & Man-Made Disaster!
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14. But wait, Heather calls the tsunami & 9/11 “evil.”
- a. I wonder; does she call prostitution “evil.”
 - b. How about gambling or homosexuality? Oh no. Never that!
 - c. But disasters that take thousands of lives? That merits the label “evil” from Heather & her atheistic friends.
15. From whence comes this attribution of evil?
16. She wants to use *the presence of evil* to dismiss the idea of God.
17. Why can she not see that her assumption of evil **REQUIRES** the existence of God.
- a. If there is no God, there can be no such thing as evil –
 - b. Just events in the flow of time.
 - c. And the *consistent* atheist must assign a beneficial effect to these things.
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18. Why *don't* secular atheists rejoice at disaster?
 - a. They don't because something deep inside won't let them.
 - b. Though they deny the existence of God, the *reality* of His existence echoes in their hearts.
 - c. They live with an unshakeable sense of right & wrong.
 - d. They know *intuitively* that some things *ought* to be & others *ought not*.
19. When the skeptic points to evil as the basis for denying God, don't run away and hide, jump into the discussion with confidence.
 - a. Turn it around, and use the existence of evil as the basis for *proving* the existence of God.
 - b. If there is no God, how *could* there be evil?
 - c. Then AGREE with the skeptic – that evil is REAL, just as the Bible says.
20. The Word of God tells us that this world is **NOT THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS**.
 - a. Let me ask you a question: If there were one less evil act today, would it be a better world? Yes!
 - b. This would be a better world if even one *less* murder, one *less* case of abuse, or one *less* theft were committed today.
 - c. The Bible is realistic in its view that evil *does* occur & this is *not* the best of all possible worlds.
 - d. It's not, because of one crucial event – when Man exercised the great gift God gave him called *choice*, in a negative way.
 - e. Christians refer to this event as “The Fall.”
 - f. Since the Fall, men & women are born in a state of alienation from God,
 - g. Bent on a course of rebellion against Him.
 - h. This rebellion results in choices that bring harm to others & subject the creation to decay & death.
21. What we call “evil” can be divided into two categories;
 - a. *Moral evil & Natural disasters*.
 - b. *Moral evil* comes from the *choices* human beings make that produce harmful consequences for themselves & others.
 - 1) Murder is a moral evil.
 - 2) The man who drinks too much then climbs behind the wheel of his car & plows into a van driven by a mother & her 3

- young kids commits a moral evil.
- 3) The woman who cheats on her husband is committing moral evil.
 - 4) The nation that sends it's armies across the borders of another country on a war of conquest perpetrates moral evil.
 - 5) Planes turned into missiles & flown into towers is moral evil.
- c. **Natural disasters** are catastrophes that arise out of the physical creation;
- 1) ie. Earthquakes, tsunamis, tornados, famines; things that often result in the death of thousands.
 - 2) Now, **some** natural disaster have their genesis in moral evil.
 - a) Greed that deforests large areas can lead to climactic changes that result in famine.
 - b) War can affect the ecology of regions and so alter the agriculture.
 - c) Pollution driven by greed & sensuality can harm the ecosystem & create natural disasters.
 - d) Nuclear testing or oil drilling might in some way be responsible for an occasional earthquake.
 - 3) While we usually think of natural disasters striking hundreds or thousands at a time, they can also occur on a far smaller scale to individuals;
 - a) Terminal illness, accidents, & birth defects are no less tragic to those they strike than larger scale disasters that effect hundreds.
 - b) I felt far more **loss** at my mother's bedside as she took her last breaths than I did when the news of the tsunami hit.
22. What's important to remember is that **ALL** natural disasters have their **ultimate origin** in man's choice to rebel against God.
- a. God gave dominion of Earth to Mankind.
 - b. Humanity was to steward the Creation in a manner that would **protect** it.
 - c. When mankind fell into sin, a curse was visited on the creation, the curse of decay & death.
 - d. Natural disasters are the **result & evidence** of that decay.
23. And Heather's insistence that things aren't right with the Planet & the people living on it only goes to reinforce what the **Bible**

says – **THINGS AREN'T RIGHT!**

24. But we can't blame God.
 - a. We must put the blame where it belongs – with Heather! And ME!!! And every person who has ever been born. *We're* the problem.
 - b. We humans have been given a great gift. It's the image of God, and with it comes the power of choice.
 25. If God did what Heather *wants* Him to do, step in & intervene every time someone makes a choice that will result in tragedy, then in fact, they have not *made* a choice.
 - a. God has just negated their will.
 - b. And without freewill, they are no longer human!
 - c. If God steps in & ends all evil, there are no articles being written mocking God because no one has the moral or intellectual capacity to produce such thoughts.
 26. The atheist cannot reconcile an all powerful & all loving God with the reality of evil.
 27. Why can they not see that an all powerful & all loving God who steps in & negates all choices that result in evil has just erased the human race!
 28. Again, to say there is no God because there **IS** evil is circular reasoning because you have to first *assume* the existence of God so you can deny Him.
 29. Witty & cynical editorials don't hide the *emptiness* of the atheist's unbelief.
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III. LUKE 13

A. Set the Scene

1. In our text this morning, the issue of how to deal with disaster was brought to Jesus.
2. As in our day, people then interpreted disaster through the wrong lens.
3. Jesus set them straight.

B. Vs. 1-3

¹ There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And Jesus answered and said to them,

“Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered such things? ³ I tell you, no; but unless YOU repent you will all likewise perish.

1. We can't be certain what v. 1 is referring to, but there was something that happened at about this time it may be referring to.
2. Jerusalem had outgrown itself & was bursting at the seams.
 - a. One of the biggest problems was not enough water.
 - b. So the Roman governor Pilate, embarked on a project to build an aqueduct from the Pools of Solomon to the City.
 - c. Since it was a project to benefit Jews, Pilate felt they ought to pay for it & took some of the temple funds.
 - d. When it became public, thousands of Jews staged a protest.
 - e. Pilate sent Roman soldiers dressed as common people into the crowd.
 - f. Then at a signal from their commander, they drew out clubs & set on the crowd with a fury, leaving dozens dead.
 - g. Since the Galileans were political hot-heads who held far more animosity toward Rome than the people of Jerusalem, they were the greatest number making the protest, & the soldiers had been ordered to target them *specifically*.
3. It was the assumption of people at this time that what happened to you as you went through life was the result of God's judgment.
 - a. If you prospered & were in health, it was God's reward for being righteous.
 - b. If you suffered set-backs & trials it was punishment for sin.
4. In the Jewish way of thinking, the victims of this massacre *deserved* their fate because they had committed serious sins God punished them for & just used the Romans to do it.
5. Jesus makes it clear; this is *not* the case.
 - a. They died because they were murdered.
 - b. There was no direct correlation between their death & sins they'd committed.
6. But there **WAS** a lesson to learn from this tragedy – That lesson was this:

Life is short, & the choices we make today effect where we spend eternity.
7. The one choice that changes our destiny from hell to heaven is to

repent; to turn from our life of rebellion against God & surrender to Him.

B. Vs. 4-5

1. Jesus used the tragedy of *moral evil* to speak about the need to repent.
2. He added another event, a *natural disaster* to teach the same lesson -

4 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 who dwelt in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no; but unless YOU repent you will all likewise perish.”

3. Faulty building practices, or maybe an earthquake, caused a tower to fall killing 18.
4. Again, this was attributed by the people as evidence of divine disfavor & judgment.
5. But Jesus again denies the wrath of God as the cause of their deaths.
6. The tower collapsed because we live in a fallen world where the universal fate of men & women is to die.
7. And because that is the way things are, Jesus said people ought to see in such tragedies a *reminder* that life is brief, then we stand before God.
8. The way to get ready for that meeting is to repent.
9. To turn from our way to God's way.
10. To forsake our sin & unbelief & put our faith in Christ alone.

IV. CONCLUSION

A. Getting Ready

1. If you received an invitation to meet with the President in the Oval Office of the White House, would you wear your everyday clothes?
 - a. Would you rise from working in the garden with dirt on your hands & grass stains on your knees to shake hands with the President & sit down to lunch with him?
 - b. Would you crawl out from under the car where you've changed the oil, to meet & dine with him?
 - c. No way! You'd probably buy a brand new suit or dress, get a

- hair cut or style, & look your very best.
2. Chances are, you & I will never get an invitation to the Oval Office.
 3. But we all ***will stand*** before God.
 - a. Either we will stand before Him clothed in the filthy rags of our own works,
 - b. Or we will come to Him clothed in the brilliant garments of the righteousness of Christ.
 - c. Those garments are given only to those who repent of their sin & put their faith in Christ.
 4. Every day that passes brings more reminders of the fact that we will soon stand before God. [Articles]

B. The Best of All Worlds

1. As we saw earlier, because the Fall has brought about a decayed & dying creation, this is ***not*** the best of all possible worlds.
2. But the Bible tells us God has set in motion a plan to ***bring about*** The Best of All Possible Worlds.
 - a. That's what the Gospel of Christ is all about.
 - b. It's God's plan to restore creation without violating humanity's free-will.
 - c. History sees the plan of God unfold in a manner consistent with Who & What He is without violating who & what we are.
 - d. And today God extends an offer to ***all*** to gain entrance into the best of all possible worlds through the work of Christ.
3. That journey back begins with repentance.
4. When asked about disaster, Jesus didn't answer out of the theoretical or philosophical.
 - a. He made it personal.
 - b. "What about YOU!" He said. "Are YOU ready to stand before God?"
 - c. JESUS is the way to be ready.

[1] From <http://slate.msn.com/id/2112083/> • *Send a Message to God: He has gone too far this time.*
By Heather Mac Donald Posted Monday, Jan. 10, 2005, at 11:59 AM PT