

God, Natural Disasters & Me:

A topical sermon

Ps 46; Eph 1:3-14

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 2 May 2021, 16:30

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Introduction

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The last few days have shown us the terrible degree of pain and sadness in India where thousands are dying of COVID 19.

What a disaster!

And, surely, here on earth disasters abound! If it's not an earthquake disaster, then it's a cyclone disaster. And if not that, then it's a flood disaster or a volcanic eruption – like the White Island one or two years ago.

Disaster & suffering are part of life this side of heaven!

Perhaps also someone here, today, may be suffering – either physical or emotional pain!

And so, a friend of mine, who used to suffer a lot of personal setbacks in life (and struggled to believe in a loving God), used to ask: “How could a loving God allow for this?” “Why, in the first place, did God allow for the possibility of evil – any sort of evil?” – a question many have asked!

Well, many books have been written on this topic.

And all wise theologians will admit: We can reason this up to a certain point, but then we have to admit, we cannot fully explain this. Human beings can only understand God as much as He reveals Himself.

After all, because God has not given a fully exhaustive revelation of Himself & His pre-ordained plans, we cannot understand the parts that He in His wisdom chose to keep a secret!² As Dt 29 (v.29) says, “*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children ...*”

So, the “gears of the human mind all seize up” at a certain stage, unable to fully explain this mystery.³

And the Bible itself does not give a completely simplistic answer to this question. It simply says: *the revealed things we can understand, but those not revealed, belong to the LORD!*

So, instead of asking “why does God allow evil?” most Christian theologians agree that the best thing human beings could do is to rather direct all their energy to turning to God!

¹ Here are some sources I used as I studied God's Word on this topic:

1. CRABB, L. 2005. The pressure's off. Abbey House, Finland : CWR
2. BERKHOF, L. 1959. Systematic Theology. London : The Banner of Truth Trust.
3. REYMOND, R.L. 1998. A new systematic theology of the Christian faith. Nashville : Thomas Nelson.
4. SPROUL, R.C. 2006. What is Reformed Theology? Understanding the basics. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books. 236p. ISBN 10: 0-8010-6559-3; ISBN 978-0-8010-6559-0.
5. VORSTER, N. 2007. The problem of theodicy and the theology of the cross. *In die Skriflig*, 41(2):191-207, June.

² Cf. among other Vorster (2007:202ff.) for the hermeneutical challenge to Christianity explaining among other the boundaries of theology.

³ It's like trying to fully explain the Triune God – Three distinct but at the same time One; or it's like trying to explain that the person, Jesus, was fully God & fully human at the same time

Yes, we should rather ask: “*How does God relate to human suffering?*”⁴ – which is an old question, a Job’s question; a Jeremiah’s question!

Well, this sermon has seven small points. Here is the first one...

1. God knows all

Yes, nothing happens without God’s foreknowing. God is omniscient (all-knowing). Not just regarding what is happening *at this moment* world-wide (e.g., with this pandemic), but also regarding what *will happen* in future.

It’s the “old” chess-player illustration all over again...

You see, a chess-player’s chances of winning greatly improve *the better he can predict the moves of his opponent*.

Yet, even with the *chess-player* all possible future moves his opponent might make depend on the word “if.” So, as the chess-player sits there & he tries to envisage up to ten future moves of his opponent, he is constantly saying to himself, “*If he moves his pawn that way, then I will move my pawn this way*” – if ... then, if ... then (series of “ifs” & “thens,” i.e., a series of unknown events – or “*contingencies*”).

Well, God knows all contingencies and, as someone has said, “God does not know them contingently” (conditionally).⁵

You see, human beings go through learning experiences, but God has no learning experience (He never goes through a learning curve)⁶.

If we ask a human being, “What will you do tomorrow?” he/she might answer, “That depends.”

Well, God never answers “That depends.” He knows it all!⁷ Is it a wonder then that God’s Word says, “***I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come***”?⁸

So, God *knows* all future events! But is that all? Does He only *know* them or is He also *steering* them?

2. God steers all

You see, the Bible is clear on this: God *steers* all things: Eph 1:11 says, “***In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will***.”⁹

So, *everything* that happens is God’s will!

Everything? Even bad things?

Yes, in a sense!¹⁰ In the sense that: God does not sin;¹¹ that He is not the author of sin!

How come we say, “God is not the author of sin/evil,” yet we say, “All things that are happening (even evil things) happen by His will”?

⁴ Cf. e.g. Vorster (2007:204)

⁵ Sproul (ibid:272)

⁶ Sproul (ibid:171-2)

⁷ He knows all contingencies but none of them contingently (cf Sproul, ibid:172).

⁸ Is 46:10a ***I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come***.

⁹ Eph 1:11, Acts 4:27-28, Prov 16:33, also cf. WCF 3:1 *God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.*

¹⁰ Cf. Sproul (ibid:172) on Augustine.

¹¹ Cf. among other, 1 Jn 1:5; Js 1:13 & Reymond (1998:372-376)

Well, to try & solve this problem, Bible scholars talk of God's will as a twofold will: His *effecting* will and His *permitting* will!¹²

So, e.g., did God's *permitting will* allow the bad thing that happened when Joseph's brothers sold him to Egyptians. Yet, God changed this bad event to good when, years later, He saved many people through Joseph's leadership position in Egypt.¹³ In other words, it was God's *effecting* will that finally saved many people through Joseph's leadership in Egypt, but it was His *permissive* will that initially allowed Joseph to be sold by his brothers.

Here's how a very gifted theologian¹⁴ once said it: "... even evil, though ... hateful to the holy God, ... does not occur apart from His provision or against His will, but appears in the world which He has made only as the instrument by which He works higher good."¹⁵

And, here's where human limitation comes in, i.e., that, as God permits an evil event to take place, we humans cannot always see the "higher good" which God is working (or, is *going* to work) by that evil which He allowed. Yet, in some cases (only very few, though,) human beings might, in hindsight, be able to see anything good that has come out of a bad event – which brings us to the third point...

3. The limit of human reasoning

You see, someone might say, "But if you talk of God's *permitting/allowing will*, then just by using the word *permit* or *allow*, are you not admitting/conceding that there is another powerful force to whom God, without losing all power, is nevertheless giving away some ground?"

Well, my brother & sister, it is at this point that even our best intentions & efforts to explain how a good & loving God could allow evil to exist, end up in a dead-end street. And so, even the craftiest theologian has to admit: The Bible does not give (want to give) a complete explanation of God's being and His works.¹⁶ Anyway, how could any creature (yes, even the *crown* of God's creation) ever be able to fully understand its Creator? I mean, it would take at least an equal to understand an equal – wouldn't it?

So, this brings us to a key truth in dealing with disasters, i.e., that, even though the believer, in great reverence to God, is allowed to ask the "Why?" question (just like our Lord Jesus on the cross asked, "Why?"), the believer may not, in this life, get a conclusive answer.

And so, what should the believer then do?

Well, rather than trying to get an answer to his/her "Why?" question, would not the believer do better by rather seeking God *in* his/her suffering? – which brings us to point no. 4...

4. Seeking God in my Suffering

¹² decretive will & permissive will or "voluntas efficiens" and "voluntas permittens" (Sproul, *ibid*:173; Barth *apud* Vorster, 2007:194)

¹³ Gn 50:20

¹⁴ **Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield** (November 5, 1851 – February 16, 1921) was professor of theology at Princeton Seminary from 1887 to 1921. Some conservative Presbyterians consider him to be the last of the great Princeton theologians before the split in 1929 that formed Westminster Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B._B._Warfield]

¹⁵ Cf. Warfield (*apud* Reymond, 1998:373)

¹⁶ Cf. among other Vorster (*ibid*:202ff.)

Is that not what the psalms of lament¹⁷ are known for? They have emerged from the hearts of godly psalmists who did not complain to God in brute anger, but rather in basic trust!¹⁸

You see, faith does not ask “What is the *origin* of suffering/evil?” It rather asks, “What’s *God’s solution* for suffering/evil?”

Yes, faith does not allow evil to *cause doubt* in God. It rather concentrates on *how God relates to my suffering*.

Is that not what Job did?

You see, even though this godly sufferer did not understand the *reason* for his suffering, he rejected all logical & theoretical answers on the origin of suffering/evil, and rather put the emphasis on the *faithfulness of God amidst suffering*.¹⁹ Is that not why even this Old-Testament believer could pray/cry out,

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!²⁰

What do we see from this Old-Testament believer’s cry?

Well, don’t we see two things in which the believer finds comfort? – that is:

- I have a Redeemer!
- I have a future!

And that brings us to the fifth point in the sermon...

5. My Lord is Familiar with Suffering

My brother & sister,

Someone might ask: “But what has your God done to bring an end to evil and suffering?”

The answer is: Our God is the only God who got His hands dirty in making an end to suffering and evil. He gave His Son! And His Son is not unfamiliar with suffering! In fact, it’s through His suffering that all suffering will one day come to an end – when, at His return, He will throw the evil one into the lake of fire!

See? In Christ, God is not unfamiliar with suffering!²¹

¹⁷ Many of the psalms between 1 and 41, and also some between psalms 42-72, cf. e.g., Hill, A.E. & Walton, J.H. 1991. A survey of the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI : Zondervan. p.279

¹⁸ Cf. Vorster (2007:204)

¹⁹ Rephrasing of Louw (apud Vorster, 2007:204)

²⁰ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Job 19:25-27

²¹ In saying this, I don’t mean to say that the Father suffered pain as the Son was on the cross of pain/suffering. For the fact that only Christ, touching His humanity, could suffer physical & emotional pain – and not the Father nor Christ touching His divine nature – cf. e.g., www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/immutability-impassibility-god/ for, “...Immutability and Impassibility are key, historic attributes the church has confessed, attributes that distinguish the infinite and eternal Creator from the finite and temporal creature. Immutability means God does not change in any way; he is unchanging and for that reason perfect in every way. Impassibility, a corollary to immutability, means God does not experience emotional change in any way, nor does God suffer. To clarify, God does not merely choose to be impassible; he *is* impassible by nature. Impassibility is intrinsic to his very being. Impassibility does not mean God is apathetic, nor does it undermine divine love. God is maximally alive; he is his attributes in infinite measure. Therefore, impassibility guarantees that God’s love could not be more infinite in its loveliness. Finally, impassibility provides great hope, for only a God who is not vulnerable to suffering in his divinity is capable of rescuing a world drowning in suffering....”

And is that not why the Apostle Peter drew the Christian sufferer's attention to the sufferings of God's very own Son (in 1 Pt 4:12-13), "... ***do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ***"?

See how in the battle between good and evil (God and Satan), The Father crushed His beloved Son to make His now-suffering-loved-ones right with Him and to work towards the eventual end of all *suffering*?

And does not this *just*²² yet pain-inflicting act of the Father show the love that God has for believers on earth!?

Can you see why the question should not be the *unanswerable* "If there's a loving God, why is there evil?" but rather "How does God relate to my suffering?"

Congregation, the suffering Job did not only rejoice in His Redeemer; he also craved for the future – and so does the New-Testament believer,²³ only with more reason for certainty, which brings us to point 6...

6. The Comfort of Christ's Return (guarantee, Rv 21)

My brother & sister, the comfort for the Christian does not stop at the cross with the *suffering* of God's Son; no, the comfort continues because our Immanuel didn't stay in the grave! His suffering did not end in failure & irreversible loss (as unbelievers cry over the death of a loved-one). No, He rose – a guarantee/pledge of our resurrections!

You see, if this life was all there is, then as someone has said,²⁴ "the only reasonable and compassionate response" to this world with its pain would be that everyone, including whatever god exists, should do their best to *relieve pain this side of the grave*!

But, look, as it is, because of the resurrection of Immanuel (God-with-us), your & my resurrection is secure! So, I am looking forward to a better world to come, to a world where life continues for those who are in Christ; to a world where we will see our loved-ones again, yes even those who died through a disaster.

Is that not why the Apostle Peter did not only say, "...***rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ,***" but that he also added "...***so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed***" (1 Pt 4:13)?²⁵

So, when I look at Christ & the future, I know that *through this Immanuel (God-with-us)*, God is in control – of what? ...

Well, of His *eternal plan* with His loved-ones!

See? As one Bible Scholar says, "*We cannot count on God to protect us from suffering of any kind of measure. The worst evil can happen to the best Christian. But we can count on God to enable us to draw near to Him whatever happens and, eventually, to experience deep joy when we do.*"²⁶

²² See where the word "theodicy" (*theos* = God, and *dikē* = justice) comes in? Thus the word "theodicy" describes *the vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil* (Also cf. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/theodicy>)

²³ Christ suffered; the apostles suffered; the Christians are persecuted – suffering is part of this world.

²⁴ Crabb (2005:192)

²⁵ Emphasis mine

²⁶ Crabb (2005:194)

This is Rm 8:28 all over again:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

See? God is in control! Of what? Of saving his loved ones eternally, and, as our Ephesians passage reminded us, “... **He works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.**”²⁷

7. Christian Faith – only Faith that gives an answer to pain!

Well here comes some apologetic reasoning (Christian-defence reasoning):

- If there is no Christ; never were a Christ; if it were all someone’s imagination then, firstly, whoever invented Christ would be more famous/known than Christ!
- Secondly, if there was no Christ, then we’re left with only the Old Testament! – yes, with only half a story of redemption; actually, an aborted redemption – promises to a nation/people – promises never fulfilled!
- If you/I were then to try *another* religion, all we would find is only *human-invented* religions which teach how people should try to do the impossible, i.e., by own effort trying to make themselves right with the gods!

Thus, my brother & sister, in this world of suffering, there is only one way – the way of the *One who is familiar with suffering* – our Lord Jesus, the very Son of God!

Yes, everyone is sad when a loved-one dies, whether by natural death or by disaster. But, on Biblical grounds, I dare say that he/she who really knows Christ, is the one who doesn’t get angry with God. Yes, he/she still hurts (& even badly so), but instead of asking from a point of anger “Why did You allow this evil?” the believer rather seeks God’s comfort in his/her pain.

And have we not seen such a God-worked attitude 13 years ago?

Yes, remember the reactions of the family members & friends of the seven young people who died in the Tongariro creek on 15th April 2008! People, who in their pain/suffering gave God the glory (rather than bursting out in anger at Him)!

My brother & sister, how dark the picture for him/her who suffers without the Triune God! Such person’s pain is double!

How we pray for the comforting light of Christ to shine in the hearts & lives of those who are currently in grief & mourning about loved ones who died of COVID 19!

And is it not exactly that which our Lord is calling us to do? Pray for (& work towards) the spread of the Gospel of hope in our circle & beyond!

May God help us!

AMEN (2436 words excluding footnotes)

²⁷ Eph 1:11b. It’s about this will that the Apostle Paul says: *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Rm 8:38-39).