

EARTHQUAKES, HAITI AND THE GOSPEL

TEXT: SELECTED SCRIPTURES

January 17, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

Stunning events like the recent earthquake in Haiti raise many troubling questions. Erwin Lutzer, in his book, *Ten Lies About God*, writes,

“Jews want to know where God was during the Holocaust; Christians want to know where He was in the massacre of the Armenians; the Kosovars want to know where He was during their bloody civil war. In fact, there is not a person reading this who has not asked that question in the face of tragedy....” (p. 61).

The reality of pain and suffering has led many to question the love, goodness and power of God. The problem goes like this:

If God is all-loving, good and all-powerful, how can He allow such untold and unexplained suffering to exist? Is God simply incapable of doing anything about the problems humans face and thus not all-powerful? Or, is God really not loving and thus indifferent to human suffering?

C.S. Lewis says this apparent dilemma is the problem of pain in its simplest form (*The Problem of Pain*, p. 26).

Clearly, the problem of evil and suffering does not concern only the philosopher or theologian. It invades every facet and age of humanity in a very personal way. No one goes through life entirely unaffected by pain and suffering.

Suffering comes in a variety of forms and degrees.

Perhaps one is afflicted by unwanted singleness, a broken marriage, a troubled marriage, loneliness, depression, loss of job, sickness, physical limitations, etc...

There is no doubt that an event like the earthquake in Haiti, leads us to ask many questions which seem to defy any real answers. In the face of such untold suffering we might ask:

Where is God in Sudan, where over two million Sudanese Christians have been martyred for their faith? Where was God five years ago when an Indian Ocean tsunami killed 250,000 people in 14 countries? If God is compassionate and all-powerful, why doesn't He intervene to stop mudslides, volcanoes, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, drought, hunger, poverty, crime and disease?

Undoubtedly, the existence of suffering presents us with difficult challenges. It is for this reason that we must exercise caution when seeking to offer reasons as to why such events occur.

I suspect many of you by now are aware of the comments made by Pat Robertson, where he blamed the earthquake on the pact the Haitians made 200 years ago with the devil to win their freedom from France.

I think Scotty Smith's comment captures the proper response to such a comment when he stated, "Jesus, help us to protest very bad theology about earthquakes with very great mercy, compassion and generosity for the people and nation of Haiti." Even if a retraction is made or an apology offered, such statements cripple the church's credibility and witness to an unbelieving world.

The extent of the Bible's teaching on the origin of evil and the existence of suffering doesn't always take us as far as we may desire for it to. Therefore, it would be wise for all Christians to remember Deuteronomy 29:29 during tragic events, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law." Humility requires us to admit there is much we do not understand. We must affirm all that the Bible teaches, and go no further. Calvin's words, although directed toward the doctrine of predestination, are yet wise and instructive,

"...it is not right for man unrestrainedly to search out things that the Lord has willed to be hid in himself, and to unfold from eternity itself the sublimest wisdom...He has set forth by His Word the secrets of His will that He had decided to reveal to us. These He decided to reveal in so far as He foresaw that they would concern us and benefit us," (*Institutes*, 3.21.1).

When it comes to tragic events like the earthquake in Haiti, we first need to understand that the Bible's purpose, in reference to suffering and evil is more practical than philosophical.

John Stott writes,

"...the Bible supplies no thorough solution to the problem of evil, whether 'natural' evil or 'moral,' that is, whether in the form of suffering or of sin. Its purpose is more practical than philosophical. Consequently, although there are references to sin and suffering on virtually every page, its concern is not to explain their origin but to help us to overcome them," (*The Cross of Christ*, p. 312).

What then can we say about such horrific events? How do we make sense of the reality of evil and suffering? How can we trust and love a God who allows such untold suffering to take place?

The answer, without trying to sound superficial, is the gospel. All pain, suffering and evil must be viewed from the perspective of the gospel. We must seek to understand the relationship between the gospel, evil and the sufferings of humanity.

John Stott, in his book, *The Cross of Christ*, writes, “We have to learn to climb the hill called Calvary, and from that vantage-ground survey all life’s tragedies. The cross does not solve the problem of suffering, but it supplies the essential perspective from which to look at it,” (p. 329).

In the remainder of our time this morning, I want to set forth just two perspectives the gospel gives us in relation to suffering and evil. I want to show how these two gospel perspectives provide us with the hope necessary not only to persevere but to assure us that we will ultimately overcome all suffering and evil.

LESSON:

I. THE GOSPEL REVEALS TO US AN UNDERSTANDING AND SYMPATHETIC SAVIOR (HEBREWS 4:14-15).

The author of Hebrews, in Hebrews 4:14-15 writes, “¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

Evangelicals, in an effort to guard Christ’s deity, have sometimes unfortunately distorted Christ’s humanity and thus been guilty of presenting a docetic view of Christ (Docetism, a Christological error dating back to the early part of the 2nd century, taught that Jesus only seemed to have a human body and only appeared to be a human person). This is regretful. For, if Christ had not become fully human in all respects as us, there would be no basis for salvation and the restoration of His creation.

Man’s ongoing struggle is to reconcile God’s power, goodness and love and the daunting fact of evil and human suffering. What man wants to know in his discouragement and despair is that God not only has power but that He cares.

The Incarnation, the truth that God entered the world, became a man and suffered throughout His life (suffering which culminated on the Cross) provides undeniable proof that Jesus understands humanity’s suffering.

The gospel reveals to us that Christ not only possesses power, but that He knows and feels our deepest pain. John Calvin wrote, “For by his birth he was made like us in all respects [Heb. 2:17] that he might learn to feel our pain [cf. Heb. 5:2],” (*Institutes*, 2.16.19). John Stott writes, “I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as God on the cross,” (*The Cross of Christ*, p. 335).

One of the most fundamental and crucial implications of the gospel in relationship to humanity's suffering is the suffering that Christ endured on the Cross. Jesus' suffering on the cross (rendered possible because of the Incarnation) is significant because it demonstrates that He indeed suffered and is therefore able to understand and sympathize with humanity's suffering (Heb. 4:14-15).

Only the cross of Christ is capable of providing a proper perspective to humanity's dilemma of suffering and evil. P.T. Forsyth wrote, "The cross of Christ is God's only self-justification in a world like ours." This gospel perspective may not answer all of our questions in regard to the existence of suffering and evil. But, it does give us historical and undeniable proof of our Savior's understanding and sympathetic love. Thus, as Ravi Zacharias writes in his book, *Cries of the Heart*, "The cross somehow invades us as the only reasonable point of definition for a wounded world," (p. 60).

There is a second perspective the gospel gives to us in regard to evil and suffering.

II. THE GOSPEL REVEALS TO US A VICTORIOUS, CONQUERING SAVIOR (COL. 2:13-15; EPH. 1:21-22).

The cross and resurrection stand as an unambiguous declaration of Christ's objective, decisive victory over all sin, evil, suffering and death.

First, Colossians 2:13-15 is perhaps the most important passage in the New Testament, which sets forth Christ's victory on the cross.

A. THE VICTORY OF THE CROSS

In Colossians 2:13-15, Paul incorporates two different yet related aspects of Christ's victory on the cross, namely the deathblow to sin and Satan's power. Paul writes,

¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

In light of such a clear declaration of victory, one may be tempted to ask or think, "If Christ won the victory at the Cross, why is sin and suffering still present? The horror in Haiti seems to disprove this statement."

The answer is that one needs to understand the nature of Christ's victory. John Stott explains,

"The conquest is depicted in Scripture as unfolding in six stages, although the decisive defeat of Satan took place at the cross. Stage one is the *conquest predicted*... (Gen. 3:15)... The second stage was the *conquest begun* in the

ministry of Jesus...the third and decisive stage, the *conquest achieved*, at the cross...Fourthly, the resurrection was the *conquest confirmed* and announced...Fifthly, the *conquest is extended* as the church goes out on its mission, in the power of the Spirit, to preach Christ crucified as Lord and to summon people to repent and believe in him...Sixthly, we are looking forward to the *conquest consummated* at the Parousia,” (*The Cross of Christ*, pp. 231-239).

George Eldon Ladd describes the present age in which we live as the time between *the already and the not yet* of the Kingdom of God (emphasis mine).

In his discussion of the parable of the Tares and Wheat and the “mystery of the kingdom,” Ladd writes, “Precisely here is the point of the parable: the Kingdom has come into the world without effecting a separation of men; this awaits the eschatological consummation...The Kingdom has come; but society is not uprooted. This is the mystery of the Kingdom,” (*The Presence of the Future*, pp. 232-233).

This was the sticking point for the Jews of Christ’s day. They believed that all of the blessings of the kingdom of God would arrive in one coming of the Messiah. However, we know that this is incorrect. God’s triumphant victory over his foes is a multi-stage event.

Understanding the nature of Christ’s victory is vitally important from a practical perspective for our daily lives. Many believers struggle with the reality of evil and suffering precisely because they fail to understand the nature of Christ’s victory. Rather than a theology of the cross, many live with a theology of glory (just watch TBN!). It is essential to grasp this truth.

Understanding that we currently live in the overlap of two ages, provides us with the necessary perspective in regard to the reality of suffering and evil. It is the key to understanding the present age in which we live.

In their book, *Empowered Evangelicals*, Rich Nathan and Ken Wilson write,

“In his first coming, Messiah defeated the enemies of God. In his second coming, Messiah will destroy the enemies of God. In Jesus’ first coming, satan, sin and death were judged and condemned at the cross (see Col. 2:13-15; John 12:31). In Jesus’ second coming, satan, sin and death will be removed from the new heavens and the new earth and be thrown into the lake of fire (see Revelation 20:10, 14),” (p. 67).

In one sense, the age to come has already begun. Yet, in another sense, this fallen age endures for a time. Thus, we live in the intersection of both times, we live in the “*already but not yet*” of the Kingdom of God (emphasis mine).

The Scriptures teach that we have tasted the “powers of the age to come” (Hebrews 6:5) but we have not yet sat down to fully feast in them (Rev. 19:9).

Why is all of this theology important? How does it provide help in the daily reality of life's hardships? How does understanding the "already but not yet" nature of the Kingdom of God affect our expectations? What can we expect as we await the final consummation of God's Kingdom?

First, because the Kingdom of God is "already," (i.e., inaugurated) we can and should presently expect to taste the blessings of eternity.

In His first coming, Jesus came to bring about the invasion of the kingdom of God. We saw this last week in Galatians 3:5, where Paul speaks of the Galatians experience of the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit. We should expect some sick to be healed (cf., Jam. 5:13-16) and the demonized to be delivered (Matt. 10:1, 7-8; Lk. 10:1, 8-16).

At the same time, because the Kingdom is "not yet" (i.e., fully consummated) we should not be surprised at the reality of suffering as though some strange unexpected thing were happening (1 Pet. 4:12). The blessings of eternity must also be moderated by the reality of suffering. And standing in the center of the overlap of the two ages is the gospel (i.e., Christ's death and resurrection).

We see this balanced "gospel" perspective clearly in 2 Corinthians 4:8-10.

Paul writes,

“⁸ we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.”

Throughout his letters, Paul assumes an indivisible link between the Holy Spirit's power and the believer's present weakness. In Romans 8:17-27 and 2 Corinthians 12:9 Paul shows how the Spirit is the believer's source of power in the midst of affliction and weakness.

In Acts 14:8, when Paul was ministering in Lystra, a southern province of Galatia, he healed a man who had been crippled since birth and never walked ("Already"). However, immediately after this miraculous display of the inbreaking of God's Kingdom, Luke says in v. 19 that Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead ("Not Yet").

In Philippians 3:9-10, Paul says that knowing Christ means knowing both the power of His resurrection and the fellowship/participation in His sufferings.

Gordon Fee, a Pentecostal NT scholar, commenting on Paul's statement in Philippians 3:10 writes,

“God’s concern for us in the present is that we live cruciform, ‘as conformed to Christ’s likeness in His death’...Nonetheless, Paul also expects God’s more visible demonstration of power, through the Spirit, to be manifested even in the midst of weakness, as God’s proof that His power resides in the message of a crucified Messiah,” (*Paul, The Spirit and the People of God*, pp. 144-145).

This tension between the “already and not yet” of the Kingdom of God reflects Paul’s understanding of the believer’s existence in the present. Power (“already”) in the midst of suffering (“not yet”) is a tension that Paul keep together in ways that many do not today (*Paul, The Spirit and the People of God*, p. 145).

For example, conservative Evangelicals tend to emphasize the “not yet” to the exclusion of the “already” (under-realized eschatology). Thus, the present is depicted as all weakness and the future all glory. Pentecostals and Charismatics err in placing too much emphasis on the “already” to the exclusion of the “not yet.” Thus, the present is depicted as all victory, prosperity, health and wealth (over-realized eschatology like the Corinthians, cf. 1 Cor. 4:8).

The answer to both is to live with a gospel-balance, what Gordon Fee calls Paul’s “radical middle.” Fee writes,

“For him [Paul] it was not simply tension in which the present was all weakness and the (near) future all glory. The future had truly broken into the present, as verified by the gift of the Spirit; and since the Spirit meant the presence of God’s power, that dimension of the future had already arrived in some measure. Thus present suffering is a mark of discipleship, whose model is our crucified Lord. But the same power that raised the Crucified One from the dead is also already at work in our mortal bodies. This paradox in Paul’s understanding is what creates so many difficulties for moderns. We have tended to overemphasize one to the neglect of the other. Paul, and the rest of the New Testament writers, hold these expressions of Spirit and power in happy tension...Paul thus steers a path through the *radical middle* that is often missed by both Evangelicals and Pentecostals, who traditionally misplace their emphasis on one side or the other,” (*Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, p. 145, emphasis mine).

What then will our experience look like in the present Kingdom? What can and should we expect?

Nathan and Wilson explain,

“Our experience of the thrill is always tempered by our knowledge of the agony, and our belief in the power of God always runs side-by-side with our experience of pain and suffering. Empowered evangelicals make sense of power and pain...through the grid of the already and not yet of the kingdom of God...we will not see total healing of our racial and ethnic divisions until the holy city Jerusalem comes down from heaven (see Revelation 21:10), but we can experience

substantial healing of our divisions now (see Ephesians 2:14-17). Likewise, we will not experience the eradication of disease until the second coming of Christ (see Revelation 21:4). Nevertheless, we can expect many mental and physical healings (see James 5:13-16),” (*Empowered Evangelicals*, p. 70).

Christ has already purchased our healing at the cross (1 Peter 2:24; Matt. 8:17), but we still experience sickness (Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 4:16). We have already passed from death to life (1 John 3:14), but we still die (1 Cor. 15:26). We already possess the sanctifying Spirit as a guarantee of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14), but we still experience a daily battle between our flesh and the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-18). We are already citizens of God’s kingdom (Phil. 3:20), but we must still submit to the authorities of this world (Romans 13:1). We already possess every blessing of the age to come in Christ (Eph. 1:3), but as John Stott points out God has willed for us to come into the full inheritance of these blessings in unfolding stages.

Through the gospel, however, we have received the promised Spirit who is the evidence of the Kingdom of God now and who is the guarantee of the fullness of the Kingdom in the future (Eph. 1:13-14).

So, as we read a passage like Colossians 2 in light of the “already/but not yet” nature of the Kingdom, we can believe with confidence and proclaim with integrity the victory Christ won for us on the cross.

Equally important is Christ’s victorious resurrection.

B. The Victory of the Resurrection

In Ephesians 1:20-22, Paul writes that God the Father

“²⁰ ...worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And He put all things under His feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church...”

Here, Paul sets forth Christ’s victorious resurrection, exaltation and enthronement over all creation! It is impossible to write about the victory of the Cross without also discussing its relationship to the resurrection.

The resurrection is the apex of the Gospel. It is the confirmation of the victory Christ won at the Cross. Apart from the resurrection, rather than being a great victory, Christ’s death on the Cross would have been a tragic failure and utterly meaningless.

Not only that, if there were no resurrection, all suffering and life itself would be a senseless tragedy and hopeless. This of course is simply restating what Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 15, for example, “¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised...¹⁸ Then those also who

have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”

If there was no resurrection, there would be no atonement for sin, faith would be vain, the proclamation of the gospel would be vain and the Good News would not only be bad news but false. Paul writes,

“¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. ¹⁵ Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised...¹⁷ and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.” (1 Cor. 15:14-15, 17).

However, because Christ rose from the dead (thus conquering death; cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 47-49, 54-57), the believer has a living hope, not a wishful hope.

By virtue of the resurrection, Peter says the believer will obtain an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, will not fade away, which is reserved in heaven and protected by the power of God (1 Pet. 1:4-5).

Christ’s second coming is the earnest expectation for all who have received the grace of God. In Titus 2:11-13, Paul writes,

“¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, ¹² instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, ¹³ looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus...”

At His appearing, the salvation of believers includes more than being delivered from the presence of sin, though this is great! The salvation of believers also includes the “redemption of our body” (cf., Rom. 8:23) wherein Christ will, “transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself,” (Philip. 3:21).

The Kingdom, which Christ inaugurated in His first coming through His death and resurrection, will be consummated in His Second Coming, which marks the end of all suffering and evil forever (Rev. 21:1-4).

Because of Jesus’ resurrection, we have certain hope of ultimate victory over evil and suffering because Christ, the “first fruits,” guarantees the resurrection of all who belong to Him (1 Cor. 15:22-24).

CONCLUSION:

How do we respond to such things? When we have said as much as we can and our understanding has been exhausted, the only appropriate response is humble, gospel-

driven worship. Peter expresses such gospel-driven worship when he wrote to a group of believers experiencing vicious persecution by the Roman Emperor Nero. In 1 Peter 1:3-9, he writes,

“³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵ who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, ⁷ so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; ⁸ and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, ⁹ obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.”

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