

Why doesn't God protect people from hurricanes and other natural disasters?

Job 37:5-13, (page 483) Romans 8:28-39 (page 158)

In October of 2005, about the same time Hurricane Wilma was forming in the Gulf, two of our Pittsburgh friends flew to Cancun Mexico for their annual 2-week fun-n-the-sun vacation. Then, as Wilma began approaching the Mexican coastline, vacationers were advised evacuate and go home. But Bob and Barb, betting that Wilma would miss them and not wanting to cut their vacation short, decided not to leave.

Wilma did not miss them.

That is why the pair ended up huddling in a crowded flooded school classroom for 36 hours as Wilma – with screaming 100 mph winds - simply parked over the Yucatan peninsula. Then they spent another three days "camping out" with two other couples in a wet, powerless, waterless, windowless, hotel room until enough debris could be cleared from the airport to allow relief and evacuation airplanes to again land.

After Bob & Barb got back home, I sent them a sympathy card displaying a glorious satellite photo of Wilma as she made Mexican landfall (it was a very massive and pretty hurricane from space). Into which I had photo-shopped a little "you are here" arrow pointing to the approximate location of their school house bunker. I hoped that it would make them laugh and come to view their mis-adventure in a larger scale – eventually.

Cancun also fared rather poorly that week. Wilma did extensive damage to the hotel district that had been built out from the coast on an artificial barrier island, heavily damaging most of the multi-million dollar resort complexes and stripping away the very carefully built up beaches. Some of the Cancun hotels actually reopened for business by the next summer; it looked more like vacationing in a war-zone (I guess some people liked that) But it would take another three years before most of the damage was repaired and the beaches somewhat restored.

So one might be tempted to ask, Why didn't God protect Bob & Barb and all those people from Wilma and other such hurricanes? **Why does God allow volcanoes, tornadoes, earthquakes tsunamis and other such natural disasters devastate so many human lives.**

That's an honest question. Let's look for an answer by viewing hurricanes such as Wilma or Katrina and other such events on a larger planetary scale, as if from a satellite photo, to see if they really are as bad as we think them to be... or do we only label them as such because, like Bob and Barb, we failed to get out of their way.

Some biblical teachers have explained natural disasters like earthquakes, volcanoes, forest fires and floods, as resulting from God's curse laid upon the planet at its beginning. They say that these are the actions of a planet tearing itself apart. Their expectation is that the new heavens and earth will be spared all such bone rattling events. And for proof they will refer to the Apostles Paul's remarks on personal and planetary suffering: *We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now* (Romans 8:22).

But do "planetary labor pains" serve as an apt metaphor for hurricanes, volcanoes, earthquakes and such?

Think for a moment.

Are such events as evil as we make them out to be or could they be a part of God's larger creative process – which we for the most part do not understand and to our own risk fail to appreciate? In "natural disasters" **Are we seeing "creation ... in bondage to decay?" Or are we actually seeing *God doing great things that we cannot comprehend?***

As Elihu cautioned Job – who undoubtedly was suffering on several levels – just because we fail to see their purpose, does not mean that what we call a natural disaster is innately evil; it may be working for a larger good.

*God thunders wondrously with his voice; **he does great things that we cannot comprehend.** For to the snow he says, "Fall on the earth"; and the shower of rain, his heavy shower of rain, serves as a sign on everyone's hand, so that all whom he has made may know it. ... He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning. **They turn round and round by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them on the face of the habitable world. Whether for correction, or for his land, or for love, he causes it to happen.*** (Job 37:5-13)

Did you hear that last line...

Whether for correction, or for his land, or for love, he causes it to happen.

Let's take these earth shaking events in this order to see if all of them are as evil as we make them out to be: floods, hurricanes, forest fires, volcanoes, earthquakes and tornadoes and tsunamis.

Floods For those in their path, floods have been described as a "slow motion disaster." There is this inevitable helpless sense of doom as the flood waters slowly rise around your home and you have but one choice, to flee carrying what you can while the rest disappears beneath the brown murky waves.

But until people built homes in flood plains, that brown murky water used to be considered a gift from God. It was such annual predictable floods that actually built up

both the Egyptian and the Mississippi deltas as rich verdant farmland. Flood plains are meant for farms. Each year the floods bring a deep drenching and a new top dressing of soil to produce verdant crops.

Those few farmers who built in flood plains built accordingly, stilt houses, or easily replaced thatch huts. It is only as people crowded into flood plains or built inappropriate structures such as brick buildings and cities, that flood troubles ensued. Notice that even Elihu knew the distinction between habitable and un-habitable land.

The people of Bangladesh have little choice, theirs is an overpopulation problem, with an entire nation formed on top of what should be sparsely settled farmland.

But for Americans, residing on the Mississippi was purely a business choice. And in our hubris, thinking that the Mississippi could be tamed and made more useful for industry, we have dredged, straightened, damned and leveed the river. Then we drained the protective swamps (that would have swallowed the floods) for more farm land and we have needlessly crowded cities right up to the river's edge. You know the rest of the story.

Thus, no longer replenished by the spring floods, farmland along the river has not only lost fertility but the reverse has become true. In an effort to boost production, farmers add agricultural fertilizer which along with other industrial waste now flushes down the river and, unbuffered by the mangrove swamps out into the ocean. This has a major and negative impact on the Gulf fishing industry – long before any oil rig accidents.

Also, the City of New Orleans, built out on the swampy delta, resultingly has now sunk an average 1-2' below sea level, with some areas 10' below sea level. And that sinking continues at around an inch a year – a foot a decade.

Thus, regardless of what some preachers have claimed, hurricane Katrina was not God's punishment directed at a sinful city, as much as an inevitable disaster of our own making. And as it also applies to Cancun's hotels stuck out into the ocean: **Crowded populations and tall buildings built of "sinking sand" will always fall down when the storms come and the winds blow.**

One side note: After Katrina there actually was a sensible call to relocate and rebuild New Orleans further inland on solid ground... so what are the reasons for, and what will be the probable future of, now rebuilding New Orleans on the same location?

And the same lesson of not building on floodplains can be applied to building beach houses in **hurricane zones**. Before Florida's swamps were channeled and drained, and then re-flooded with retirement and vacation homes, they were like the rest of the southern coastline, well suited for certain kinds of farming - rice, sugar cane and seafood – but not well suited for many humans. And historically the hurricanes that

regularly blew over the peninsula were a gift replenishing the freshwater swamps and keeping the subterranean aquifers filled. It was a balanced ecosystem.

But with the drastic change of land use that balance has been broken. Hurricanes and storm surges now destroy homes where they should never have been built and the disappearing swampland is unable to replenish the subterranean aquifers. Only recently, and perhaps too late, has the State of Florida begun attempts to somewhat restore the natural balance of swampland and water – but will they ever convince people to build more appropriate beach houses?

OK preacher we get your point. In the natural course of things, floods and hurricanes are beneficial both to the land and to humans who work in cooperation with nature, who keep the balance, and only they are only destructive to those who try to defy the same. **But can we say the same for volcanoes and forest fires.**

Surprisingly yes. Those who live under the shadow of **volcanoes** risk the loss of life and property only if they do not build accordingly and live appropriately. But remember, those same volcanoes also give great benefit: Not only are volcanoes responsible for some of the richest farmland in the world but also the very existence of those islands that we consider tropical paradises. Let's be honest with ourselves what would Hawaii, Tahiti, and many of the Caribbean islands be without volcanoes (just another part of the ocean)

So let us not forget what Job advised his wife: ***Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?*** (Job 2:10).

Forest fires are another example of our need to appropriately care for the land – which we fail to do at our own risk. Only within the last decade has the forest industry realized that regular burns are what produce healthy forests. Much of the current out-of-control firestorms now devastating western states have resulted from previous efforts to suppress all fires -- supposedly in protection of timber and private homes. Healthy forests will always need the occasional fire as part of a balanced ecosystem in which we humans had also better learn to live in balance.

So floods, hurricanes, volcanoes and fires are what God has always done **for his land or for love**, and if we get it out of balance – **for correction**.

Now we come the harder phenomena: earthquakes and tornadoes and tsunamis.

Earthquakes are result of moving continental plates. Our planet has a large molten core over which our continents have been cruising are like sailing ships. It is these moving plates that bring up raw materials from the center of the earth, create new lands in the midst of the oceans, fold up those "purple mountains majesty that we so admire, and maybe one day even solve all our California problems.

And **Earthquakes**, a byproduct of that movement, do us little harm - if we build appropriately.

Japan's recent earthquake, the 5th strongest in the 20th century, toppled few buildings and no skyscrapers because the Japanese have strict earthquake building codes. The damage resulting from the tsunami is another matter.

Contrast Japan with the island of Haiti that was devastated by a rather mild earthquake, primarily by the falling of buildings that weren't even built according to basic structural codes. So again it's the human element and our unwillingness to be prepared that makes earthquakes deadly.

All jokes aside, California is another example of human hubris in our unwillingness to live in balance with the larger system. The western portion of California, sits on the American continental plate that is being folded under pacific plate.

Whether devastating earthquakes will hit San Francisco or L.A. is not a matter of "if" but "when" and according to seismologists the "when" is overdue.

After the 1906 earthquake which demolished San Francisco to the same degree that Haiti was demolished, the debris was simply pushed into the harbor as land fill ... and yes more houses and buildings were built on top. Only those built recently have been "earthquake proofed." So what do you think will happen with the next Big One hits San Francisco?

The lesson is: If we humans could only learn some environmental humility and begin living in balance, in cooperation with our larger ecosystem, and the planet, then the destruction and loss of life which comes with such natural phenomena would be minimal – they would not be disasters. But there's the real problem, will we ever learn to live humbly and in balance with our world?

This brings us at last to tsunamis and tornados. Tsunamis are destructive waves that result from earthquakes under the sea floor and tornados are the result massive thunderstorms (the "whirling clouds" mentioned by Elihu?). both are very destructive of anything in their paths, And surprisingly no one knows of anything "good" that they do.

As one climatologist quipped, *I can think of only two benefits of tornados; they give people a chance to see the power that nature can exhibit and they provide an exciting challenge for people who chase them and study them* (David R. Cook, Climate Research Section, Argonne National Laboratory).

Others have ironically noted that tornados and tsunamis are also a boon for the construction and lumber industries.

But just because we haven't yet discovered any good resulting from these two truly natural disasters does not mean that there aren't any. If nothing else such tremendous destructive acts of nature can remind us of how little mastery we actually have over God's planet and to that extent teach us the humility that we need to live in harmony with it and better fulfill our stewardship roll of it.

Job lost his home and family to a tornado, his cattle and servants to marauding thieves, and his health to disease. At first, he humbly accepted all of this evil as he had the good that he thought came directly from the hand of God.

But after a nagging wife and friends wore him down, Job finally demanded of God an explanation for all his personal suffering. In response God took him on a verbal planetary tour, giving him a satellite view of God's care for all of creation.

At the conclusion of his global tour, Job responded to God:

'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. "... I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' (Job 42:1-6).

In conclusion, we find that that we – not God – have played a large part in creating most of what we call natural disasters. And the resulting destruction of property and the loss of life, stems from our unwillingness to live in harmony with our surroundings and to humbly plan for the realities of floods, hurricanes, fires, volcanoes, earthquakes and even tornados and tsunamis.

Yes there are contributing complex issues politics and population control, but we humans would live a happier life if we only could learn a little appreciation of and humility towards this planet, and all its ecosystems, that have been given into our care.

Let's give Job the last word:

*ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and the fish of the sea
they will declare to you.*

*Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?
In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being. ...*

*'With God are wisdom and strength;
he has counsel and understanding.
If he tears down, no one can rebuild;
if he shuts someone in, no one can open up.
If he withholds the waters, they dry up;*

if he sends them out, they overwhelm the land.