

Christian perspectives on disaster

1.1 Understanding disaster

Many different disasters are mentioned in the Bible. Sometimes we are given an explanation of why they happen, and sometimes we are not. In this section we look at the different reasons for disaster.

Disaster as a consequence of broken relationships

Many disasters mentioned in the Bible do not appear to happen for a specific reason. They are a result of the fallen world in which we live. In Genesis 3 we read that, because people turned their backs on God and wanted to live their own way, the relationships between people and God, among people, and between people and creation, were broken. Therefore, disasters triggered by 'natural' hazards or so-called 'acts of God' often have human sin at their root. This is because people have been made vulnerable by their own actions and those of other people, due to inequity, injustice and greed.

Christians can be affected by disasters as much as anyone else. Christians get sick and die, they are robbed and raped, they have accidents and can be killed by, or lose loved ones to, natural hazards. Christians are eternally safe in God's hands because in heaven there will be no more death or suffering. However, until that time, Christians live in the world and therefore suffer the consequences of sin.

Disaster as judgment

The Bible rarely mentions a link between specific sin and disaster. Many of the prophets proclaimed disaster as a consequence of worshipping idols.

A well-known example of God bringing disaster as a means of judgment is the flood in Genesis 6-8. Here, the flood is a direct and universal judgment on human beings because of their sin. After the flood, God vowed not to bring such a universal disaster on the earth and its people again. This does not mean that there will be no natural disasters, but that they will be limited in their impact.

Disaster as a call to turn to God

Deuteronomy 28:15-68 is one example of God threatening disaster in order to call his people to turn to him and obey him. In the book of Jonah, we read that God did not destroy the city of Nineveh as he had threatened, because after Jonah's prophecy, the people repented and turned from their evil ways.

Although God does sometimes use disasters as judgment on sinful people, or to bring people back to him, we must not forget that all of us (even if we are never affected by disaster) will one day be judged by God. Disasters can therefore act as a reminder to us of the broken world in which we live and our need for a restored relationship with the Creator.

BIBLE STUDY

Who should repent?

- Read Luke 13:1-5. Two disasters are mentioned in this passage. One is a massacre of the people of Galilee. The other is a tower that fell on people in Siloam.
 - *Were the people who had been killed worse sinners than anyone else?*
- *What point is Jesus making in this passage?*
- *In the light of Jesus' words, how should we look at ourselves?*
- *How does this make a difference to us if we are tempted to say that a particular disaster was 'deserved' by those affected?*

Disaster as a sign

The Bible tells us that disasters will continue during the time before Jesus comes again to fully restore relationships.

BIBLE STUDY

Disaster as a sign

- Read Matthew 24:3-8.
 - *What are disasters a sign of?*
 - *Jesus is saying that disasters will happen before he comes again. If we*
- can never completely stop disasters happening, should we just sit and watch? Why not? What Bible passages help us come to this conclusion?*

1.2 Our response to disaster

When disaster happens, it is sometimes not easy to see things from God's perspective. We may not be able to identify why a disaster happens, but we should always be ready to take action. For example, we should:

- Trust that God knows what he is doing by allowing the disaster to happen, and that he can bring good out of bad situations.
- Look at ourselves and assess our relationship with God. We should look carefully at how we as individuals, our churches and our nations are serving or failing God, and seek to put things right. We should turn to him for forgiveness through Jesus Christ.
- Look to see how we can help those affected by the disaster (see Bible studies on pages 9–10).

- Look at how we can stop disasters happening in the future in order to reduce unnecessary suffering. Often there is little we can do to stop hazards happening, but we can reduce people’s vulnerability to them. This involves challenging unequal or broken relationships and upholding biblical values of compassion, equity and justice.

BIBLE STUDY

Joy in the face of disaster

Habakkuk chapters 1 and 2 describe a conversation between the prophet and God about the future of the nation of Judah.

- Read Habakkuk 3:1-2.
 - *What do we learn about God’s character?*
 - *How should this inform the way we pray in difficult situations?*
- Read verses 3-15. These verses describe in poetic language how God has shown his anger in previous times.
- Read verses 16-18.
 - *What is Habakkuk’s reaction to the approaching disaster?*

- *Why is Habakkuk fearful?*
- *Yet why does he ‘wait patiently’?*
- *What does it mean to ‘rejoice in the Lord’? What is the relationship between this and God’s power as displayed in verses 3-15?*
- *How do we relate to Habakkuk’s positive view in difficult times.*
- *What can we learn from this passage?*
- *Do we find it easy to ‘rejoice in the Lord’ and rely on him during difficult times? How can we encourage each other to do so?*

BIBLE STUDY

Serving our communities

- Christians are called by God to serve and bless those around them. Look at the following Bible passages:

Matthew 5:13-16	James 1:27
Mark 6:35-44	James 2:14-17
Luke 10:25-38	1 Peter 3:8-17
John 13:1-17	1 Peter 3:10
Acts 2:42-47	1 John 3:16-18.

- *What are Christians called to do in their communities?*
- *Why are they called to do these things?*
- *What activities might this involve in relation to disasters?*
- Look at Mark 12:28-31; 1 John 4:10-21 and Matthew 5:43-45.
 - *How does the Christian motivation to help those in need differ from the motivation of secular humanitarian agencies?*

Micah 6:8 is a key motivation to both bring compassion after a disaster has happened, and to make efforts to stop disasters happening. The Lord requires:

A commitment to justice Disasters are often as a result of injustice such as greed and inequality. Through advocacy work, Christians can challenge these unjust relationships and make people less vulnerable to hazards.

Love of mercy We should have compassion for those who are suffering. We should be merciful towards people regardless of their culture, religion, sex, age or ability, remembering that all people are equally valuable to God (Genesis 1:27).

The church is well placed both to help in times of disaster and to take action to reduce people's vulnerability to hazards. This is because the church exists at grassroots level and its members have a wide variety of necessary skills and resources. Christian relief agencies should work closely with the local church, because the local church can sustain the work when the relief agency moves on.

BIBLE STUDY**The church in Antioch takes action**

- Read Acts 11:27-30. A famine was predicted by prophecy, and the church in Antioch decided to provide help for the Christians in Judea.
 - *How did the church respond to the famine?*
- *What can we learn from the Antioch church's example of the famine relief it provided?*
- *Is there anything we can do now to prepare for any future disasters here or elsewhere?*

REFLECTION

Disasters often make people consider the meaning of life and cause people to find spiritual understanding and comfort. They ask questions like: 'What has happened?' 'Why has it happened?' 'Is there a loving God?' 'Why did he not stop it?' God often uses such events in people's lives to change hearts, minds and lives.

- Should disasters change the way we carry out our work? Why?
- How can we avoid taking advantage of people's vulnerability?
- Should we hide the fact that we are Christians when we are distributing aid?

We should provide aid to everyone affected, whatever religious beliefs they hold. This is emphasised in the internationally-accepted Red Cross Code of Conduct.

- How can we discourage people from thinking we only support Christians?