

HUMAN SUFFERING DOES GOD NEED A DEFENSE?

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There are no words to describe what's happening in Haiti: tens of thousands of people swept into eternity without a moment's warning. And now the surviving multitudes are not only bereaving, but going about utterly homeless.

Whether they believe in Voodoo, or no god, or in the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our Creator/Redeemer, the question haunts everybody: "Why does God [whoever He is] permit such horror?"

The Bible is not helpless in times of disaster such as this. The dead are in God's care; it's the horror now of the survivors that is our heart burden. This disaster is an extenuation of the cataclysm that was Noah's Flood. It was the Flood that originated the earthquakes that our earth suffers. Whatever sinful guilt anyone can say these tragic people had acquired, we must not try to say; we all share it as the human race corporately.

The Lamentations of Jeremiah are God's textbook for disaster survivors. The people of Jerusalem had suffered the most horrible defeat and destruction; they lost everything. After lamenting their utter tragedy, the prophet wrote: "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. . . . Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord" (3:22, 40).

The Flood was a curse to the whole earth from which it has never completely recovered. The earth was mortally wounded; it needs to be completely re-created. That must come when the Lord Jesus returns. The sooner, the better!

That's why those who ponder the teachings of the Bible long for the promised second coming of "the Savior of the world." Whatever days of peace and pleasure are granted to us, let us thank God for them, realizing even our next breath is a gift of His much more abounding grace. Let us give as best we can to send relief to those who suffer; then let us look at everything we have in a new light: nothing we have liked to call "ours" is ours; it is lent us in trust to use for the good of others.

But we're struggling to find something good to say about the calamity in Haiti. Imagine hundreds of thousands of people's home devastated. We never thought we would see things like this before the Bible's "seven last plagues" of Revelation 16. Can we find some good news? Yes:

(1) Innumerable acts of kindness are being done by people, even strangers; the Holy Spirit has not yet been withdrawn completely from the earth!

(2) There is evidence of the love of God still active; in wrath He has remembered mercy (Hab. 3:2).

(3) In the disasters described by the prophet Ezekiel his "woes" usually ended with the promise, "and thou shalt know that I am the LORD" (35:9, for example, KJV).

(4) It's always, yes, always, good news to learn to "know the LORD." Even the final "lake of fire" at the end of the millennium (the 1000 years of Revelation

20:11-15), demonstrates the mercy of the Lord. The lost will say “Thank You” for that “Lake” rather than exist forever in tortured consciousness of their own utter self-condemnation. They will “welcome destruction,” says a very wise writer.

(5) Is God sending these terrible disasters? Is Port au Prince more wicked than other great cities, thus deserves them? This same question was asked Jesus after a local disaster: “Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans, because they suffered such things?” He answered: “I tell you, no, but unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:2). Jesus didn’t bring that disaster but He brought good out of it, for all the world to learn.

(6) There is precious good news in this remark of Jesus: it’s possible for all of us to “repent” because repentance is a universal gift that the Holy Spirit tries to give us (if we will believe and receive the gift; John 16:8).

(7) This painful disaster, with world TV and news coverage, educates us all in a happy lesson about Reality; it’s another proof of God’s love: “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out [when we “evacuate” we won’t even carry our papers with us]. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content” (1 Tim 6:7, 8). Precious contentment! Enjoy it today.

It took an earthquake to alert the man to ask the question: “What must I do to be saved?” (he was on the verge of suicide, for “he . . . was about to kill himself,” but Paul had told him not to do it, Acts 16:25-30). (There’s a “health reform” message

embedded here—value the life God gave you, stop any unhealthful practice; let your mind be clear so you can understand the voice of God; stop shortening your life).

Many “evangelists” will try to answer the man’s question of what to “do to be saved.” Paul’s immediate answer was, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (vs. 31; that’s the inspired answer!).

But what does it mean to “believe”?

(1) It’s something you “do” with the heart. Rom 10:10. Your choice is involved.

(2) It’s not a terrorism ultimatum; it’s a heart appreciation of the love involved in the text, “God so loved that He gave . . .” (John 3:16-18).

(3) Ponder that “love.” Let it in. It “casts out fear” (1 John 4:8; Rom. 5:5).

(4) There’s a better motivation for serving the Lord than terror of the Lake of Fire, and it involves that love (2 Cor. 5:14-21).

(5) But believing also includes doing, for you “come to Me,” says Jesus (Matt. 11:18-30).

(6) You can’t “come” unless you humble your proud heart, for He is “meek and lowly in heart,” He adds. That repels or attracts you.

(7) “He who comes to God must believe that He exists, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). You simply must believe that He is already your Friend, and also your Savior from the second death (2:9).

(8) You join the believing thief who is crucified with Jesus, and pray, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (Luke 23:42).

(9) “You mean I must ‘join’ riff-raff people, like that thief?” Yes, that’s where we all belong (Rom. 3:23). The only other alternative is to join the other thief who was also crucified with Jesus.

We cannot evade making this choice. The whole world will eventually stand with the one or the other, and this will be included in the mark of the beast or seal of God choice all will make (Rev. 13:15-17; 6:1-4). Let’s permit the Savior to “draw” us (John 12:32, 33)! Don’t resist Him.

In 1906 the Titanic disaster was still some six years away; but now historians say that San Francisco’s pride and joy, the Palace Hotel, was the Titanic of that day. Built ostensibly to be earthquake proof (San Francisco had known past quakes), in only a few hours on April 18 the Palace was ruins. When the people saw it burn, they knew that their beloved city was doomed. The fire was worse than the quake.

Why would a God of love permit such a horrendous disaster? The death count was close to that of our 9/11 (there was no Al Qaida to blame, only God). Now, a century later, the seismologists warn that another big quake is due anytime and very little preparation has been made for it.

When we stop to reason, we can begin to realize that the pride and greed of man made the 1906 disaster worse than it needed to be. Previous quakes had destroyed much of the city (1864, 1898) and the resultant rubble had been dumped in the Bay, only to create new “land” on which more city had foolishly been erected. It was lethal building land. Every square inch seemed valuable for putting

buildings on; even dirt that filled in lakes was built on (it also liquefied in the quake). California was booming and San Francisco was where wealth came easily. Money for building seemed unlimited. Heaven was being built on earth. And God was pretty well forgotten. Let’s not forget Him today.

He has indeed promised to create “new heavens and a new earth,” but not before the second coming of Christ. The earth is fragile like an old garment worn out (Isa. 51:6); God has not promised to re-create those earthquake faults now, nor stop the formation of hurricanes and tornadoes now. But He has promised to care for those who “dwell in the secret place” of prayer with Him (Psalm 91), and are “content. . . . having food and raiment” though living among popular extravagance (1 Tim. 6:6-9). If God calls you to live and work in the equivalent of “San Francisco,” do so as a missionary.

Many thoughtful Muslims are asking, “Why does Allah permit such terrible disasters as this horrendous earthquake in Pakistan/Kashmir?” The media tell of people pinned under concrete wreckage crying out piteously, “Allah, hear us!” until the cries cease.

At the same time many thoughtful Christians ask, “Why does God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the Bible says ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8), why does He permit these awful things like tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes?” To say nothing of our wars that we humans create ourselves.

All such questions inevitably revert to the great one: why did the loving Creator of the world permit

the Flood of Noah? It upset the earth's equilibrium! In that history we see the portrayal of the government of Heaven in relation to fallen, sinful humanity. God did not permit the Flood to come until for 120 years, through Noah He had proclaimed a message of "the righteousness which is according to faith" (1 Peter 3:18-20; Heb. 11:7). But unbelieving, rebellious humanity had become a curse to themselves. "The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence" (Gen. 6:11). Now only a small portion of the earth's surface is inhabitable, for again "the earth also is defiled under its inhabitants, because they have. . . broken the everlasting covenant" (Isa. 24:5). That's a guilt we all share.

God purposes that that same message of "righteousness by faith" again be proclaimed worldwide (Rev. 14:6-12). "The prince of this world" who wreaks this havoc is not Christ—he is the Enemy of Christ, "the prince of the power of the air" (cf. John 14:30; Eph. 2:2).

Fox News noted that many common people look upon the spate of terrible disasters since the Christmas tsunami in Guam, our own Katrina/Rita, and now this terrible earthquake in Haiti, as "signs of the times." "Experts" discussed "disaster theology."

We are among the survivors who through our TV and news media witness "the destruction that wasteth at noonday [when] a thousand. . . fall at [our] side and ten thousand at [our] right hand; but it [has not] come nigh [us]." It's "only with [our] eyes" that we "behold and see" these horrors (Psalm

91:6-8). No! we do not think that those who perished in that cataclysm (as the school girls) were "wicked" more than we; all we know for sure is that we are alive and well and 50,000 people just as good or "worthy" as any of us have perished.

Something else we know for sure: As in the days of Jeremiah, "it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not..... He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men." (Lam. 3:22-31, KJV). Our life and all we have is a gift of God's much more abounding grace; now let us confess this and "henceforth live not unto [ourselves] but unto Him who died for [us] and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

In a statement that is apparently timeless in application Ellen White says: "God does not stand toward the sinner as an executioner of the sentence against transgression" (GC 36). The statement does not say that God is not "an executioner"; that is left open. The point is that He does not "stand toward the sinner" in that capacity. He does not want to appear to the sinner as the "executioner," and thus coerce by fear what He would will only by love.

Presenting Him "toward the sinner" as the "Executioner" who will carry out that sentence is not God's soul-winning plan. And yet we hasten to add that God is not deceiving the un-reconciled sinner with advertising cleverness. Rightly understood, even His wrath is an expression of His soul-winning love. How to express this is our task.

And this is not to deny that God will be the Executioner. Rather, how shall we present Him “standing toward the sinner”?

There are serious arguments that can be adduced in support of the fear motivation. It is not wholly or necessarily negative; a perfectly healthy person with no neuroses will look both ways before crossing a busy street. It's common sense. Nor can it be denied that throughout the 6000 plus years of human history God's inspired servants have often employed fear as their motivation tool for inducing sinners to respond. The OT prophets frequently speak of God destroying nations and people. There is no question that God sent the Flood to destroy sinners, also the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah, and destroyed the Egyptians at the Red Sea crossing.

The question that is of concern to us is what appeal will God use in that final “lighting of the earth with glory”? A “voice” will sound from heaven with unprecedented power, “Come out of [Babylon], My people.” Will the motivation be associated with a uniquely clear revelation of the cross, what the Son of God accomplished there, and what it cost Him to save the world? Or will it be the quintessential appeal of fear inspired by the most terrorism-sounding message of all time? “The third angel's message in verity” appears on the surface to be the latter.

Does the cleansing of the sanctuary ministry of our High Priest include a clearer concept of the atonement than God's people as a body have perceived in the past? If so, will it result in a more complete reconciliation with God than has ever in

the past been experienced by God's people as a body? And again, if so, will it be a clearer revelation of the *agape* of Christ? It must be true that nothing less can achieve such an unprecedented reconciliation!

Admittedly, this question reopens a contention that has boiled for half a century—was the 1888 message genuinely new light, or was it a mere re-emphasis of 16th century Reformationist and current Evangelical ideas? The most precious message is one far in advance: it is parallel to and consistent with that unique truth of the cleansing of the sanctuary.

It would follow that a heart motivation imposed by *agape* does figure largely in the power inherent in that message. The reason must be that the cleansing of the sanctuary accomplishes a “final atonement,” seen as an ultimate heart experience of reconciliation with God.

Wherein is the message “Be ye reconciled to God” associated with comprehending the cross? The context of 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15 can help:

(1) “The love [*agape*] of Christ [is what] constraineth us,” that is, motivates us. But in this final day of atonement, it's not just an “extremist” apostle so moved, but a corporate “body” of believers. Never before has this happened to such a “body.”

(2) Why this development? The church matures, to think and to appreciate that “love,” more deeply. Because of clearer light, more cogent, meaningful concepts, “we” conclude from reasonable evidence—“we thus judge.”

(3) “Judge” what? The answer: how “One died for all.” The equation probes why He died, and what He accomplished thereby. The cross has to become the focus of the third angel’s message in verity.

(4) What does the ensuing motivation accomplish? An unprecedented degree of consecration sensed by “all saints.” “Those who live” can no longer “live unto themselves,” the only solution to the problem of corporate lukewarmness. This would seem to be the motivation that “constrains” that corporate body of believers to “follow the Lamb [the crucified Christ] whithersoever He goeth”—a new (level development in history deemed worthy of special mention in Revelation, where all references to the church are couched in corporate terms.

(5) The context indicates that “be ye reconciled to God” experience depends on a clear comprehension of how “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself,” how He took upon Himself “their trespasses.” The last rays of light to shine upon this dark world, we are told, will therefore be “a revelation of God’s character of love.” Here is objective truth, not merely subjective emotion.

What message can reconcile the alienated, world-loving, self-centered, “lukewarm” heart to God? Unless a clearer understanding of the gospel becomes involved, the result must inevitably be further lukewarmness of devotion perpetuated generation after generation for centuries more.

(7) The present-day truth pleads with the sinner “in Christ’s stead.” That is, as soul-winners we enable

the sinner to identify with Christ so fully that he experiences a first-hand encounter with Him as vivid as did the Samaritan woman at her well or Nicodemus in his night interview. This is soul-winning and soul-holding evangelism. Nothing else grips bored, world-loving Adventist youth.

A cogent argument can be raised against this view. Here in 2 Corinthians 5 we find the fear motivation prominently featured side by side with the *agape* motivation. Speaking of the final judgment, Paul says, “Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” (vss 10, 11). So, does it end up as a 50/50 case—twin motivations of *agape* and terror? How could Ellen White say so emphatically it is “not” fear nor the hope of reward?

Reading Paul’s paragraph in context suggests there is no conflict. Preaching “terror” is not Paul’s evangelism method. He does not preach God “standing toward the sinner as an executioner of the sentence against transgression,” but he speaks of his own “terror” as an apostle appearing “before the judgment seat of Christ” as an evangelist who failed to do his duty. “Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of Him” (vs 9). His “terror” of the final judgment is not of the lake of fire, but the frightful shame of “appearing” in the presence of the Savior of the world as a minister unmotivated by the *agape* of Christ.

This is the “terror” that Peter sensed when he looked into the eyes of Jesus after denying Him with curses; it wasn’t the dread of hell fire that troubled the faithless disciple. That same “terror” induced Judas Iscariot to create his own preliminary

hell. Both disciples were now beyond a craven fear of punishment. (The Bible recognizes a “terror” that is not fear-motivated, nor egocentric. It is horror for the reality of sin itself, total self-condemnation).

Why doesn’t God destroy our wicked world now? There is an answer in the sanctuary service of Israel:

(a) Two lambs were offered “daily” on the altar of burnt offering, morning and evening, in behalf of everyone within the boundaries of Israel. “Strangers” and Gentiles were included as the beneficiaries. No repentance was required, no confession; no questions were asked; the lambs were “offered continually,” whether anybody believed or not (Ex. 29:38-42). All you had to do was to be a human being, and you were under the umbrella of God’s abounding grace.

(b) This was the gospel by “moonlight” (Rev 12:1). As we come to the “sunlight” of the New Testament, the meaning is made clear: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). “God has encircled the whole world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air [we breathe]” (*Steps to Christ*, p. 68). The daily service of the two lambs was a ministry for the whole world. When Jesus came to John asking for baptism, he refused. Jesus had to give him a Bible study there in the water, convincing John that He was the antitypical Lamb of the daily service. “Then he suffered Him” (Matt. 3:15).

(c) The next day John introduced Him, saying, “Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Not “maybe,” “perhaps,”

or “He would like to be,” or “He takes away the sin of a few.” Why this universal sacrifice of atonement? “He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

(d) The “incense” offered on the altar of incense daily or continually was also a type of a universal ministry of intercession. Only the blood of Jesus continually ministered keeps this wicked world from being destroyed (Rev. 8:3-5; when He ceases to minister His blood, then will come the time of trouble). Thank God He still ministers today in the Most Holy Apartment! That has to be Good News! And you and I can respond today! And that’s Good News.