

“WHERE IS GOD WHEN... PART #1:  
KATRINA, TSUNAMIS, AND OTHER ‘ACTS OF GOD’”

(Psalm 46:1-5, 10-11)

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**[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) Series Intro Video; (#2) “West Wing” Video Clip]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 1-11-09]

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1. **[Traditional Service ONLY:]** Read Text: Psalm 46:1-5, 10-11 and Pray.
2. **[WATCH SERIES VIDEO INTRO (Time: 0:20) – end on this week’s sermon background slide]**
  - A–“*Where Is God When...?*” Probably every one of us has gone through times in life when we felt like we were inside a long, dark tunnel, asking some form of this question.
  - B–Even as people of faith, we wrestle with this issue called “*theodicy*” – about why a loving and powerful God would allow tragedy, suffering, and evil in our world.
  - C–Now obviously, this is a very complex issue, and given the fact that people of faith have wrestled with theodicy questions since the beginning of time, there’s absolutely no way that we can realistically resolve them in one six-week sermon series.
3. But in this series beginning today, there *are* several things that I think we *can* realistically accomplish:
  - A–First, we’ll explore various dimensions of this issue to help us better understand both *God’s* role and *our* role in life’s tragedies, and how God *really* works in our world.
  - B–I’ll also point us in several *directions* that I hope will give us some interchangeable *spiritual tools* <sup>1</sup> to help us make better sense when bad things *do* happen.
  - C–And then, on the final week, we’ll experience God’s grace together in a unique way through a special Service of Hope and Healing.

--II--

4. So, with these thoughts in mind for the whole series, let me introduce today’s focus by inviting us to watch a clip from the TV series “The West Wing,” where the President of the United States is visiting a Red Cross relief shelter following a tornado strike in the Midwest.
  - A–**[WATCH VIDEO CLIP– Red Cross kitchen volunteer asks President Bartlett “*What kind of a God would do such a thing?... What kind of plan could this possibly be?*” – from “The West Wing,” Season 5, Episode #6, “*Disaster Relief*” (Time: 1:23; DVD Index: 29:07-30:30)]**

B–Now, this particular disaster was fictional, but the sentiment expressed by this worker is real, and her words are ones I’m guessing that we’ve all either heard or said ourselves following devastating natural disasters:

1–3,000 people killed in Hurricane Katrina in 2005;

2–225,000 killed by the 2004 Tsunamis in Southeast Asia;

3–85,000 killed by the cyclone in Myanmar just last May, and another 80,000 dead and 10 *million* left homeless by the SW China earthquake last June (2008).

4–And the list could go on and on and on.

C–You know, whenever we as human beings experience suffering, we instinctively want to try to find *someone* to blame for it, and since natural disasters are obviously outside of *human* control, who usually gets the blame? God, of course – so much so that most insurance policies call such events what?... “*Acts of God*”! <sup>2</sup>

D–And yet, my question is: ...is that *really* the way God works our world? Does God sit up in heaven somewhere manipulating our natural world, *causing* tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and other natural tragedies on earth “just for kicks”?

5. Now, I can understand how people in the past could say this, because they didn’t understand the forces of nature that produce these things, and so for them the only “logical” explanation was that “*God is mad!*” But I would hope that we’re somewhat more sophisticated today.

A–For example, while we now know how essential our weather patterns and systems are for survival here on earth – they produce rainwater that fill our rivers, lakes and seas – we also know that when these weather patterns collide with each other in our atmosphere, they can produce destructive things like *hurricanes, typhoons, and tornadoes*.

B–And while we know that the land we live on is the result earth’s tectonic plates being thrust upward by molten lava from deep within our earth’s core, sometimes that lava spews up through a fissure in those plates, causing devastation (or the healthy creation of an island) in what we call a *volcano*.

C–And we also know that when these same tectonic plates collide, they release great amounts of energy that we call an *earthquake*, and if it happens underwater, that energy pushes giant waves over shallow land in what we call a *tsunami*, destroying everything in its way.

6. So the first thing we need to acknowledge is that God is not *really* the one’s who’s “*causing*” the natural disasters of our world.

A–No. It’s actually the result of the laws and processes of nature at work – laws that God designed for our benefit and nurture; but laws that also don’t change or bend just because humans happen to be in their path. <sup>3</sup>

B–And all of this means that the *proximate cause* of natural disasters is simply “nature being nature.” Now, most of us (even non-religious people) will probably agree with this.

7. So the question then becomes: ... *“If God is a good and powerful God who doesn’t cause natural disasters, then why doesn’t He stop or prevent them from happening? You know, if He created the laws of nature, then why doesn’t He suspend them occasionally?”*

A–Well, I believe both the scriptures and history itself contain examples where God does just this (or at least *seems* to) – we call them “*miracles*.”

1– Remember Moses parting the Red Sea? <sup>4</sup> ...Elijah praying for the withholding of rain? <sup>5</sup>  
...Peter walking on the water? <sup>6</sup> ...Jesus calming a storm on the Sea of Galilee? <sup>7</sup>

2–And in history, what about the “freak storm” that scattered the great Spanish Armada in 1588? ...or General George Patton’s “weather prayer” that gave his armies clear skies for air superiority over the battlefield of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge in 1944?

B–You see, even though we could argue that it occasionally happens, we’ll never know *why* God seems to do miracles of nature for some situations and not for others.

C–And the more important thing to remember is that these miracles are not the *ordinary* way that God works, because it would mean continually *circumventing* the very laws and processes He created to support life on earth. <sup>8</sup>

–IV–

8. So then, if God doesn’t *cause* natural disasters, and He doesn’t usually *prevent* them either, then what *does* He do? Put another way, **“Where is God in the midst of natural disasters?”**

A–Well, to answer that, let me invite you to take out your bulletin and find the line that says those words in your sermon notes...

1–Now, either mentally or with a pen/pencil, I want you to move the question mark from its current location (at the end of the sentence) to right after the word “God”....

2–Now how does it read?... *“Where Is God? In the MIDST of natural disasters.”* <sup>9</sup>

B–Interestingly, this idea is precisely what today’s scripture in Psalm 46 says:

**[Cont. Service ONLY: Read Psalm 46:1-5, 10-11 (NRSV) & highlight vss. below]**

**[Traditional Service: Highlight verses below again...]**

*Verses 1-3: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”*

*Vss. 10-11 : “Be still & know that I am God! The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”*

9. You see, the answer to where God is in the midst of natural disasters and other tragedies is often right in front of us.

A–While we’re busy complaining that God has left us, or doesn’t care, or doesn’t even exist, He’s saying, *“I’m right there; suffering with you; crying with you; holding you up when you can’t hold yourself up. So don’t be afraid, for LAM WITH YOU!”* <sup>10</sup>

B—And yet, for you and I to experience this presence of God in the midst of bad things requires us to reorient our perceptions – to “*reposition our question mark,*” so to speak; to change how we see things in the midst of tragedy and disaster.

1—In his book Who Needs God?, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote, “*Religion is not primarily a set of beliefs, a collection of prayers, or a series of rituals. Religion is first and foremost a way of seeing. It can't change the facts about the world we live in, but it can change the way we see those facts, and that in itself can often make a real difference.*” <sup>11</sup>

2—You see, friends, the Bible never promises that people of faith will be “protected” from tragedies or pain, but it does promise that God *will walk with us* and sustain us in and through them, <sup>12</sup> & will redeem & bring something good *out* of them. <sup>13</sup>

C—And that’s why the only real antidote to the problem of tragedy and suffering in our world is faith in God through Christ, because only through such faith can we receive the spiritual and emotional “tools” we need to “*reposition the question mark*” of life’s tragedies – ...

1—...to see **good** where there only seems to be **evil**;

2—...to see **hope** where there only seems to be **despair**;

3—...to see **life** where there only seems to be **death**;

4—...to see **God** where there doesn’t seem to be **anything** (or **anyone**) at all! <sup>14</sup>

–V–

10. No, God doesn’t go around *prompting* natural disasters, because that’s not in His character as a loving God.

A—And He doesn’t always *prevent* them either, because to do so would be to subvert the very laws He created to sustain the natural processes of Creation.

B—But what He *does* do is walk with us through them... to comfort and support and sometimes even carry us when we can’t carry ourselves.

11. So friends, don’t wait until there’s a tragedy in your life (natural or otherwise) to meet and follow the one who can help you make it through whatever it is you have to face in life – today is a great day to welcome Him into your heart and begin trusting His grace.

12. And so we end today where we began, asking “*Where Is God When...?*” Well, God is the light at the end of the tunnel for you and me.

13. [PRAY for folks to accept Christ]

14. [HYMN: #707, “Hymn of Promise”]

### ENDNOTES:

1. I call them “interchangeable” tools because the ones that can address one week’s dimension/issue can often be used to address other weeks’ dimensions/issues, as well.

2. The irony here is that while natural disasters are often termed “acts of God,” no “credit” is given to God for years, decades, or even centuries of peaceful weather! In other words, in this way of thinking, God gets the “blame” for the “bad,” but not the “credit” for the “good.” Obviously the logic here is flawed, and points out why it is insufficient and a “copy out” merely to blame God for some bad event of nature.

3. The reality is that when human beings come in conflict with the laws of nature, humans are almost *always* going to lose, resulting in human devastation and loss of life.

4. Exodus 14:19-22.

5. 1 Kings 17 & 18; and James 5:17-18.

6. Matthew 14:25-33.

7. Mark 4:37-41.

8. Still another explanation as to why natural disasters occur on “God’s watch” deals with **the effects of Original Sin in our world**. This explanation reminds us that the scriptures say (in Genesis 1) that when God created the world, He called it “good”, which originally meant “*perfect; flawless; without fault.*” But the scriptures also say (in Genesis 2) that when Adam & Eve sinned and caused what we call the “Fall” of humanity, the created order “fell” with them – meaning that though the earth was still “good,” it was no longer “*perfect.*” And that just as God didn’t go back and remake Adam and Eve to eliminate their *personal and individual* imperfections, so God likewise chose not to go back and remake the Fallen created order, either.

What this explanation would therefore say is that the natural disasters which exist today are *not* a product of some design feature of the created order (and therefore *not* part of God’s original intention or design for our world), but are instead the result of the fallen, sin-filled state of our present creation. Our world is one that still contains *potential* for perfection (which the Bible promises for the future), but which at present is still infused with *imperfection* (Read Romans 8:19-21). In other words, the “Fall” of humanity into sin had effects on everything, including the universe we inhabit. Everything in Creation is subject to “frustration” and “decay.” In this line of reasoning, corporate Sin is therefore ultimate cause of ecological/natural disasters, just as it is the cause of personal death, disease, and suffering. And we today are therefore the recipients of this fallen, imperfect state of creation – which is still *mostly* good, but nevertheless still occasionally *harmful*.

9. This perspective was suggested by Peter Bolt in his devotional in The Upper Room devotional guide, December 29, 2005.

10. The phrase “*Do not be afraid, for I am with you*” appears at least 35 times in some form or another throughout the scriptures (Examples include Genesis 26:24, Isaiah 41:10 and 43:5, Jeremiah 1:8 and 46:28; and Acts 18:10). This means that God’s answer to tragedy and pain isn’t always (or even mostly) “*I’ll take away your suffering.*” Instead, it’s “*I’ll come down and suffer with you.*” Consequently, He came to earth in the form of His son Jesus to be one of us – to walk among us, show us the way, to show us that there is life and hope, and suffer with and for us, and weep in the midst of our hurting, and by so doing heal our brokenness. The Bible, in fact, is partly the testimony of God’s people struggling with faith in the face of a world that’s often difficult and painful. And its’ witness is *not* that God *causes* pain, *nor* is it that God always *takes away* our pain, but that is present with us in and through our pain. Read about more examples of God’s presence in the following scriptures: Psalm 23:4; Psalm 73:23-26; Matthew 28:20b; Romans 8:38-39; and Hebrews 13:5b-6a.

11. Kushner, in his book Who Needs God? (New York, NY: Summit Books, 1989), p. 33.

12. For example, most of the historical books of the Old Testament (such as 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Chronicles) are written from the perspective of people who have gone through “hell” and are trying to figure out how a God who made a covenant with them allow the things he did to happen. Consider, too, that more than one third of the Psalms focus are songs of lament or complaint (such as Psalm 13 and 22), and the books of Lamentations and Job are entirely written from this perspective. And how could anyone realistically think that Christianity is a religion that only promises happy, good things to its people when its founder (Jesus) was crucified (executed)?

13. This concept of God redeeming tragedy for His own good purposes is expressed eloquently in Romans 8:28. The cross of Jesus is the ultimate example of this – using the suffering and death of his son Jesus to save us. God takes our suffering and makes something beautiful out of it. Consider the lyrics to a recent Christian praise chorus: “*Something beautiful, something good; All my confusion He understood. All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife, but He made something beautiful of my life*” (Song “Something Beautiful, Something Good,” in The United Methodist Hymnal #394).

As a result, tragedy and suffering and either make us “better” or “bitter” – it can cause us to draw closer to God, or it can also cause us to push away from God. For example, as unwanted and tragic as they are, natural disasters cause millions of people to reevaluate the priorities of their life: hundreds of millions of dollars in aid is sent to help alleviate people’s suffering who would probably not have done so without the tragedy; and Christian ministries have the opportunity to help, minister, counsel, pray, and lead people to saving faith in Christ. In these cases, God can and does bring great good out of terrible tragedy. He takes all of the suffering and evil of our world and folds it into His own divine purposes - He doesn’t *cause* them, but does fold them into his purpose.

14. It’s this one response that carries through every other dimension we’ll be dealing with in this series, and all the others responses we’ll discuss will merely build upon this one.