

I. Introduction

Good morning! Today is March 11th. As all of you know, one year ago today, a huge earthquake and a giant tsunami devastated northeast Japan. Immediately after these two natural disasters there was yet another tragedy, the nuclear meltdown of the Fukushima power plant. Along with all of you and the rest of the world, Karen and I watched the shaking of the huge earthquake, the giant waves, and the rest of the heart-rending news on television. Most of you watched from here in Osaka. We watched from Guam, where we had gone to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary.

As the damage reports streamed in, we began to pray, and then we felt that we needed to get back to Japan as quickly as possible. So we cancelled the rest of our vacation and came back to Osaka. After a few days of preparations, we headed east, and on March 25th we arrived in Tono City in Iwate Prefecture. In Tono, we did various things, such as cleaning up debris and making onigiri for the shelters together with the city volunteers. But our main role was in establishing a CRASH relief base, connecting with churches and city offices, hosting relief teams coming to Iwate Prefecture, and coordinating their work. After that, we continued to be involved as Karen spent many weeks last year providing technical support to the CRASH offices.



In the months following the disaster, OIC raised money for relief and sent several teams to Ishinomaki with Pastor Joseph, and more members of our church family served with the Be One ministry and other groups as volunteers. I am sure OIC will continue to support the relief work in various ways in the months to come.

While Karen and I were in Iwate Prefecture, I videoed some of the things we saw, and also the prayers and comments of some of the relief workers. These videos are available on Youtube, on the Dan4Osaka channel. I would like to share one video clip. (*Run the Ofunato clip.*)

This video shows just one spot in one city, the city of Ofunato. But the destruction from the tsunami stretched across four hundred kilometers of coastline and in several places, entire towns, for example Rikuzentakata, were lost. Over 19,000 people are either confirmed dead or are still listed as missing. It will take many years to rebuild and no one is able to say when, or even if, families evacuated from the area around the Fukushima power plant will be able to return home.



The March 11th triple disaster was devastating in every sense of the word. But it was not unique; in fact, natural and man-made disasters have always been distressingly common, ever since the beginnings of human history. Earthquakes, tsunami, typhoons, tornadoes, floods, wars, acts of terrorism, famines, and other disasters occur every year in many places around the globe.

Across history, disaster has visited mankind again and again. But, the question I want to address this morning is, "How do we deal with disaster?" Do we shake our fist at God in anger? Do we kneel in repentance of sin? Do we blame God, or do we blame man? Or do we completely give up on trying to understand? Our emotions pull us in various directions, but emotions do not lead us to answers. When we struggle with something, the best place to turn is Scripture.

In the Bible, two books, Job and Lamentations, deal almost entirely with the subject of how believers understand and respond to disaster. I recommend them both to you for careful study. The book of Job deals

with the issues on an intensely personal level. Job was as righteous a man as can be found anywhere, and yet, he became a target for the devil and suffered tremendous pain and sorrow.

In contrast to the Book of Job, the book of Lamentations deals with the response to disaster on a national level. Lamentations was written shortly after the armies of the Babylonian Empire came to Israel and destroyed Jerusalem and carried off the Jewish people into exile. These events happened in 586 B.C. and they mark the beginning of 70 years of exile for the Jews. The destruction of Jerusalem was a huge disaster, the city was destroyed and many thousands were killed.

The Bible declares that we are all sinners and that sin leads to death. But, the Book of Job and the teachings of Jesus make it clear that disaster and suffering are not always a direct result of sin. When a person, or a nation, is suffering, we cannot assume that it is because they have sinned more than other people or other nations. However, in the case of the destruction of Jerusalem, we are told very clearly that the destruction was the judgment of God on His people because they refused to give up their wicked idol worship, even after many prophetic warnings. But the central message of Lamentations is still the love of God. **Lamentations 3:22-26** speak of God's love with these words:

- 22 Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.
23 They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
24 I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."
25 The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;
26 it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.**

God brought judgment upon, but He also brought healing. And, in the 2,500 years that have passed since then, the Jews have never again enslaved themselves to serve idols of stone or gold. The judgment was severe, but it was also just, it was carried out in love, and it accomplished its purpose of cleansing God's people from idol worship.

Unfortunately, this was alone was not enough to bring lasting peace for Jerusalem. Six and a half centuries after Babylon destroyed Jerusalem it was destroyed again, this time by the Romans in 70 AD. Once again, the destruction was a judgment, this time the judgment was for the failure of the Jewish people to welcome Jesus when He came to them. Jesus prophesied of that destruction in Luke 19:41-44.

II. Scripture Luke 19:41-44 (NIV)

41 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it 42 and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. 43 The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. 44 They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

III. Teaching

Jesus, God incarnate, came to His people in Jerusalem, but they were not prepared to receive Him. Instead of recognizing that God had come to them, they refused to accept the clear evidence of the miracles and they failed to believe the many Scriptures that prophesied of the coming Messiah. But some did understand and they believed the words that Jesus spoke in this prophecy. History records that those who believed Jesus' words fled the city of Jerusalem before the destruction came.

The record of Scripture is clear that disaster is sometimes the judgment of God. But in every case recorded in the Bible, the judgment comes only after clear prophetic warnings, and the judgment is brought in love, with a plan and purpose of salvation for the people. Did you notice verse 41? (**Luke 19:41**), "**As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it.**" Here is the heart of God. Jesus declared the facts, but He also wept for the people because of the



sorrows to come. Jesus knew they were soon going to reject Him, torture Him, and nail Him to the cross. This would bring judgment, because justice required it. But even so, Jesus wept for the people.

Jesus shares in our every pain and He weeps for our every tragedy. Our God is not far off when we suffer; when disaster comes He is right there with us, weeping in sorrow. Jesus weeps when disaster overtakes a nation; He weeps for the godly and for the ungodly, because He created them all and loves each and every one.

God judges sin because He is just. And God allows disaster to overtake even the best people, people like Job, when it will result in blessing and salvation for others. But God is not unfair; as in the case of Job, after the purpose of the suffering has been accomplished, God will bring rich reward to His faithful servants who have suffered for His Name. Disaster is painful. But nothing is really lost even in the worst disaster, because God uses it all for His good purposes to bring many to salvation and joyous eternal life.

All the suffering in the world is really the result of sin. Sometimes it is a direct result of our personal sin. More often, I think, suffering is an indirect result of living in a fallen world, polluted by thousands of years of sin. But even in the midst of the worst suffering, God is there, weeping with us and finding a way to use the suffering to bring about a greater good, the salvation of many men and women from all the nations.

Still, some people accuse God of being cruel because He does not immediately erase all pain and suffering. But consider this, even if someone wants to accuse God of wrong and demand that God be punished, they should realize that God has been punished. The heart of God breaks every hour because of the suffering He sees. And... and, in the person of Jesus Christ, God has already suffered the death penalty at the hands of man. We usually don't say it that way, because Jesus was innocent of all sin and He freely chose to go to the cross and die for the sins of the world. But if someone is angry at God, they should realize, God has already suffered death for the sins of the world.



The love of God is really absolutely astounding. God wanted to have a close loving relationship with you, and me, so much that He created the entire universe and humankind, even though He already knew that He would have to suffer and die on a cross in order to pay for our sins. We often fail to see how serious the suffering of the cross is. The physical suffering is just a small part of it. On the cross, Jesus took upon Himself the weight of the sins of the whole world. Every sorrow, every pain, every injustice, all the violence and anger and every war, and I believe, every so-called natural disaster – the weight of sin and all of the wages of sin and the fallen world, all of it went on to the shoulders of Jesus for Him to bear in His death on the cross. Jesus paid it all. He paid it all so that we could be free from sin and death through faith in Him.

Let's take a quick look at John 11:32-37 also. These verses come just before Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

IV. Scripture John 11:32-37 (NIV)

32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 34 "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. 35 Jesus wept. 36 Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

V. Teaching

Mary and the others recognized that Jesus could have prevented the death of Lazarus by coming more quickly and healing him while he was still alive. When Lazarus fell ill, messengers went to Jesus and begged Him to come quickly. And Jesus was not far off; He could have come while Lazarus was still alive. But Jesus intentionally came late, four days after Lazarus died. They wanted a quick healing, but Jesus had a different

plan. Jesus had already told the disciples that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Some might consider it cruel of Jesus to allow His close friend, Lazarus, to suffer illness and death. But Jesus knew that the miracle of raising Lazarus, and the testimony of Lazarus returned to life would bring many to faith and salvation. The miracle is delayed and suffering is allowed for a time, so that a greater miracle can bring more glory to God and more people to salvation and eternal life later.

Jesus understands and He deliberately waits until Lazarus has been dead for four days. For four days, Lazarus lies in the grave and his family and friends suffer. But their suffering will be redeemed when it is used to bring others to salvation. The result that is to come makes sense of the suffering. But look what we find in the middle of the story of Lazarus. **John 11:35, “Jesus wept.”** (Painting by Mark Spears) All of the sorrow and sadness of Lazarus’ death was going to be turned to joy and praise only a few minutes later. Jesus knew that. Jesus was on His way to call Lazarus back to life. But still, **“Jesus wept.”**



Have you trusted in Jesus? If so, whatever sorrow or pain or struggle you are going through, you can be sure that it is temporary and that God will use your temporary pain for good. But, it is perhaps even more comforting to know, that God is not indifferent to your pain. Jesus wept for Lazarus; Jesus wept over Jerusalem; and, Jesus weeps with each and every one of us. We are not alone in our pain. He is with us, sharing all of our sorrows.

When national disaster or personal tragedy comes, we don’t always understand why. In fact, we almost never understand why. The specifics of God’s plans and purposes in suffering are nearly always shrouded in mystery, hidden behind the curtain which hides the spiritual world from us - for our protection, I think. But we do know this. Our God, Jesus, is with us. And He carries our burdens and shares our sorrows. Jesus weeps with us.

And we know that the love of God is sure and that He works all things for the good of those who love Him. This gives us the courage to embrace the words of **Proverbs 3:5** and make them our own. **“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.”**

God allowed Satan to torment Job, so that the faith of Job could be proved and made a testimony through the Bible to millions. And after Job’s suffering was complete, God restored to Job twice as much as had been lost as a reward for Job’s faithfulness. If you read Job carefully, you will even find a promise of eternal life for Job and his children. Jesus, God the Son, allowed Lazarus to suffer and die, and He allowed Lazarus’ family to mourn for four days. But then He raised Lazarus to new life and gave them all great joy. And through this, Jesus established a testimony of resurrection that has brought millions to faith and salvation.

God judged the sins of Jerusalem and punished them with destruction, not once, but twice. But in his sermon in Acts 3, Peter gave us this word also. **Acts 3:19-21, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.”**

The things that seem to be lost will be restored when Jesus returns, just as He and all of the prophets have promised. This will include Jerusalem and the Jewish nation, of course. In fact, we already see a restoration of Israel in our day, a restoration that was spoken of by the prophets. But the restoration we see now is not the final and great restoration; that only comes when Jesus returns. The promise is sure and certain. Jesus will return, bringing healing and restoration to all.

VI. Conclusion

In this world, we have trouble and sorrows. We weep and mourn. But Jesus weeps with us, and at just the right time, He will come again and restore all things and promise of **Revelation 21:1-4** will be fulfilled. **“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven**

from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.””

Jesus, our Lord and God, will wipe away all of our tears. And then, I think, He will wipe away His own tears last of all. For when all of our sorrow and pain has been healed and our tears are no more; then the tears of God will also cease.

Let’s pray.