

Biblical Understandings of Natural Disasters and Applications for the Christian Ministry

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Natural disasters frequently occur in this world especially in Asia. The Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in 2004, Hurricane Katarina of 2005, earthquakes in China (in Sichuan province in 2009 and in southern Qinghai in 2010) and in Chile, and Iceland's volcano eruption in 2010 are some vivid examples. These disasters caused not only the deaths of hundreds of thousands, but also homelessness, injury, poverty, and mental sufferings of countless survivors.¹ The positive responsibilities of Christian leaders include providing care and comfort to the victims and survivors of natural disasters. Reversely, religious leaders sometimes make things worse in the way they interpret natural disasters. Many Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist leaders are quick to interpret natural disasters as the judgment of God. They condemn the victims for their sins and disobedience; they blame victims for worshipping idols and misbehaving.

The purpose of this paper is to review some of important passages of the Bible which discuss natural disasters. Based on diverse understandings, I am going to suggest some applications which can be used by Christian leaders and missionaries serving victims and survivors of natural disasters.

Biblical Understandings of Natural Disasters

Whenever we face natural disasters, we each become philosophers or theologians by raising profound questions: Why did these natural

1. Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami 2004 killed some 230,000 people in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India, the Andaman and Nicobar islands, Maldives and other nations as far away as the east coast of Africa. Gregory McNamee, "The Indian Ocean Earthquake & Tsunami of 2004: Will History Repeat Itself?" Encyclopedia Britannica Blog, entry posted on December 26, 2008, <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/12/the-indian-ocean-earthquake-of-2004-will-history-repeat-itself/> (accessed November 11, 2010).

disasters occur? Did the loving and omnipotent God allow these disasters to happen? Why didn't God protect innocent victims from these natural disasters? What have we done to deserve these disasters? Are these natural disasters the judgment and punishment from God? What are the meanings and lessons we might learn from natural disasters?

People of diverse religious convictions and professionals of various realms express their own views in order to make sense out of sufferings caused by natural disasters. Atheists and humanists victoriously claim that God does not exist—certainly not a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and loving. Scientists generally argue that “the occurrence of disastrous events is merely a natural phenomenon in its long-term evolutionary process.”² Their understanding is that natural hazards result not only from geophysical and hydrometeorological events but also from climate change. In addition, after admitting that “the existence of mankind is in concomitance with natural calamities,” they suggest that human beings should try their best to reduce the risk and vulnerability of natural disasters, mitigate the effects of natural disasters, and improve rescue operations by applying a multi-disciplinary approach, involving natural, social, and political sciences.³

Many philosophers have been showing interest in discussing the subject of natural disasters in relation to topics such as evil in the world, human suffering, free will, and the theodicy of God. Philosophers generally divide the definition of evil into two categories: natural evil and moral evil. For them, moral evil is differentiated from natural evil because it is generally understood as “evil that springs from the human will” in the context of poor moral decision-making.⁴ Some argue logically that the problem of natural evil, which can be witnessed through natural disasters, is so grave that to associate the “government of Nature” with creation by a good and all-powerful God is unthinkable.⁵ Others try to advocate the goodness and omnipotence of God by arguing that evil is not a substance created by God. Rather, evil is a deficiency or a privation

2. Huadong Guo, “Understanding Global Natural Disasters and the Role of Earth Observation,” *International Journal of Digital Earth* 3, no. 3 (September 2010), 228.

3. Guo, “Understanding Global Natural Disasters,” 228.

4. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Henry D. Aiken (New York: Hafner, 1948), 64; Shandon L. Guthrie, “Assessing the Problem of Evil and the Existence of God,” <http://sguthrie.net/evil/htm/> (accessed November 15, 2010).

5. John S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (New York: Henry Holt, 1874), 38. Quoted in L. Miller, ed., *Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 350.

of natural good that free creatures display.⁶ Still others try to argue that God has sufficient reasons for permitting evil in this world according to his good will. For example, John Hick, who advocates “soul-making” theodicy, stresses that “our world is a world full of violence, disease, accident, and starvation (natural evils) which allows us to exercise our virtues in order to develop our moral nature.”⁷ In addition, he says,

The very mystery of natural evil, the very fact that disasters afflict human beings in contingent, undirected and haphazard ways, is itself a necessary feature of a world that calls forth mutual aid and builds up mutual caring and love.⁸

I do not intend to estimate the validity of various arguments raised by many people of diverse religious convictions and professionals of various areas according to the logical point of view. Rather, I will delve into biblical teachings that concern this matter. Then, these biblical teachings may become the measuring stick by which we can assess many viewpoints about the problem of natural disasters.

Natural Disasters Are God's Judgments and Punishments

One must admit that the most dominant interpretation of natural disasters according to the Bible is that they are judgments, punishments, or retributions from God toward humanity's moral, religious, and social sins. Following are some examples of biblical events and passages:

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth (Gen 6:11-13).

Genesis 6:1-13 states that the violence and the socio-moral corruptions of all people are reasons for the flood. God acts in and through the agent of flood. In this case, the agent is devastating.⁹ According to

6. Augustine, “Evil is Privation of Good,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. M. Peterson, W. Hasker, B. Reichenbach and D. Basinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 253.

7. J. J. Hick, “Soul-Making Theodicy,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. M. Peterson, W. Hasker, B. Reichenbach and D. Basinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 309.

8. Hick, “Soul-Making Theodicy,” 312.

9. Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disaster* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 53.

Freithem, these agents are considered third parties: "People's sin generates certain snowballing effects. At the same time, God is active in the interplay of human sinful actions and their effects. Third parties are used by God as agents for that judgment (e.g., floodwater, Babylon)."¹⁰ The Bible also discusses that God uses disasters as people's judgment.

However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you. . . . The Lord will plague you with diseases until he has destroyed you from the land you are entering to possess. The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish. The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron. The Lord will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder; it will come down from the skies until you are ruined (Deut 28:15-24).

Look! The Lord is coming from his dwelling place; he comes down and treads the high places of the earth. The mountains melt beneath him and the valleys split apart, like wax before the fire, like water rushing down a slope. All this is because of Jacob's transgression, because of the sins of the house of Israel (Mic 1:3-5).

Along with these passages, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18-19), the plagues in Egypt (Exod 7-12), the sudden death of 70,000 Israelites from plague (2 Sam 24:15), many prophets' proclamations (Jer 24:10; 29:17; Ezek 14:21; Amos 4:10, etc.), and the psalmist's confession (Ps 78:50) make it clear that natural disasters were given by God to sinful people as his judgment and punishment. The categories of sinfulness include moral, religious, social, individual, and communal ones.

Based on these events and passages, many interpreters are eager and full of conviction in claiming a link between divine judgment and natural disasters. The concept of natural disaster and suffering as divine punishment against sin became one of the basic traditional views in the Jewish-Christian tradition and subsequently in Islam.¹¹ For example, Muslim leaders viewed that the earthquake and tsunami are signs that God is warning mankind. According to them, the disasters hit beaches of prostitution, tourism, immorality, and nudity therefore people must desist in perpetuating injustice and immorality.¹² Christian leaders make

10. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 53-54.

11. Thomas Kazen, "Standing Helpless at the Roar and Surging of the Sea: Reading Biblical Texts in the Shadow of the Wave," *Studia Theologica* 60 (2006): 24.

12. Khalid Hasan, "Tsunami & Azab-e-Ilahi" mukto-mona, Yahoo! Groups, comment posted on January 21, 2005, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/>

similar denouncements. “Pat Robertson and John Hagee blamed Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans’ debauchery and immorality.”¹³ In another place, “Pat Robertson blamed the devastating Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti on a pact between the devil and the Haitians who rebelled against French rule in the 18th century.”¹⁴ In addition, “the Association of (Russian) Orthodox Experts called the April 14 eruption -- whose gigantic cloud of ash grounded transatlantic flights for more than a week -- a response to gay rights in Europe and Iceland’s tolerance of ‘neo-paganism’”¹⁵ Similarly, the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) news release claimed that the death of nearly 2,000 Swedes on Thai beaches could be attributed to God’s anger at the jailing of a Pentecostal pastor for preaching against homosexuality.¹⁶

As a result, while natural disasters harm people with a “one time knockout blow,” teachings of religious leaders harm them perennially. While disasters themselves make people consider the physical and outward sufferings more, the rigid or unbalanced interpretations of the religious leaders worsen their sufferings by inflicting mental regret and spiritual guilt. We, therefore, have to be patient and careful not to jump to this type of conclusion. We must consider other passages that relate to natural disasters.

It is important to remember that the theme of God’s judgment or retribution is closely related to the theme of repentance and future salvation. For example, even though the flood story started with the righteous judgment of God, it ended with God’s new promise to human beings and all living creatures. In the book of Joel, God used locusts, wild fire, famine, earthquake, the trembling of the sky, and the darkening of the sun and moon in order to punish his people for their sins (Joel 1:1-2:11). It then follows that God promised the Israelites a fruitful harvest, environmental recovery, victory over their enemies, and the pouring out of his Spirit for people who repent earnestly by fasting and prayer (Joel

mukto-mona/message/22432 (accessed November 11, 2010).

13. Omar Sacirbey, “Is God’s Wrath at Work in Natural Disasters?” *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2010, Religion section, On Faith subsection, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/30> (accessed November 1, 2010).

14. Sacirbey, “Is God’s Wrath at Work in Natural Disasters?” (accessed November 1, 2010).

15. Sacirbey, “Is God’s Wrath at Work in Natural Disasters?”

16. R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Tsunami, Text and Trauma: Hermeneutics after the Asian Tsunami,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007), 125. The WBC is not affiliated with any known Baptist conventions or associations in the USA. The church describes itself as following Primitive Baptist and Calvinist principles though mainstream Primitive Baptists reject the WBC.

2:11-3:21). His promise of salvation was confirmed by the appearance of wonders in the heavens and on the earth: blood and fire and billows of smoke, the darkening of the sun, and the changing of moon's color into blood (Joel 2:30-31). Therefore, we have to be cautious in proclaiming the theme of judgment.

Natural Disasters Caused by Humanity's Mistreatment of Nature

There are many biblical examples which demonstrates this point. According to Genesis 3:17-18, the ground (or the earth) is cursed by God because Adam and Eve's sin. As a result, the ground has to produce thorns and thistles. The biblical passage indicates that thorns and thistles exist because of God's curse against mankind. However, today's disasters are natural consequences of people's sins and greed; they destroy and cause the suffering of many living creatures in this world. Because of Cain's sin, the ground no longer yielded its crops for him (Gen 4:12). The flood in the times of Noah was caused by the sins of humanity. Many prophets also prophesied that the sins of Israel resulted in the destruction of nature (Jer 4:23-26; 9:20; Ezek 14:13). In his article, "History and Environment," Young Jin Kim introduces many cases of massive environmental destruction in the Old Testament: Israelites' numerous wars; various building projects commanded by kings including David, Solomon, and Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:5; 16:8); and the destruction of Judah by the army from Babylon.¹⁷ This clearly implies that the various aspects of human sins (moral, political, economic, social, and religious) in general and the mistreatments of nature in particular can cause natural disasters.

Scientists, sociologists, and ecologists claim that global warming triggers tsunamis and floods. The thinning of the ozone layer is caused by greenhouse gasses which come from discharged traffic fumes, the usage of convenient electronic machines, and deforestation. Manufacturing companies are among the more flagrant emitters of greenhouse gasses.¹⁸ Pollution is not limited to the air. Scientists indicate that water pollution caused by sewage and industrial waste water discharged into the river and the sea results in the destruction of an orderly ecosystem. Water pollution causes the extinction of many animals and plants. It is certain that as long as industrialization, urbanization, and overcon-

17. Christian Coalition for Environmental Movement, ed., *Reading the Bible with Green Eyes* (Seoul: Christian Literature Society of Korea, 2002), 51-68.

18. Bernard Adeney-Risakotta, "Is There a Meaning in Natural Disasters? Constructions of Culture, Religion and Science," *Exchange* 38 (2009): 241.

sumption continue, the ground will be cursed because of humanity's sinfulness and greed.

Fortunately, many theologians are currently trying to solve this problem by educating people to act responsibly in coping with nature. People should live with the attitude of a steward in using natural resources. They regard the present environmental crisis "as a contemporary expression of the disruption of our relationship with the environment brought about by human disobedience."¹⁹ Some of the practical solutions they suggest include the responsible use of natural resources, respect for non-human creation and nature as a whole, and participation in environmental protection groups.²⁰ Their individual and communal efforts are called a "theology of environment" or an "ecological theology." Therefore, it is one of the main responsibilities of Christian ministers to be well acquainted with this theological teaching so that their congregations could be faithful stewards in guarding this world to be a safer place not only for humanity but also for the rest of nature itself.²¹

God's Presence, Power, and Sovereignty Manifest in Natural Disasters

In the Old Testament there are many passages in which natural disasters are introduced as a way of manifesting God's power, majesty, and his glory. The following are some examples:

Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding. . . . Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted, his splendor is above the earth and the heavens (Ps 148:7, 8, 13).

Others went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters. They say the works of the Lord, his wonderful deeds in the deep. For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They

19. Lawrence Osborn, *Guardian of Creation: Nature in Theology and the Christian Life* (Leicester: Apollos, 1993), 89; Cf., O. H. Steck, *World and Environment* (Nashville: Stevens, 1956), 75.

20. Steck, *World and Environment*, 150-161.

21. Some of the good resources for the ecological theology may be as follow: Lawrence Osborn, *Guardians of Creation: Nature in Theology and the Christian Life* (Leicester: Apollos, 1993); H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985); Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, eds., *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: SBL, 2008); Christian Coalition for Environmental Movement, ed., *Reading the Bible with Green Eyes* (Seoul: Christian Literature Society of Korea, 2002).

mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away (Ps 107:23-26).

For I am the Lord your God, who churns up the sea so that its waves roar
- The Lord Almighty is his name (Isa 51:15).

Job 38 is another good example. The book is dramatically structured by theological arguments between Job and his three friends. Old Testaments scholars generally agree that the main purpose of the book of Job rejects the view that all human sufferings are caused by sins (Job's three friends' view); instead, God is responsible for human suffering because he is allowing a righteous person to suffer (Job's view). This point reaches its climax in Job 38-41. Yahweh revealed himself in front of Job out of the storm in order to show him that he is the creator God, the sovereign God, and the righteous controller of this world. Then, in front of the still angry and dissatisfied Job, Yahweh vividly and specifically revealed himself as the creator of this world, seas, heavens, stars, and rain. Furthermore, he revealed himself as the provider of all animals (such as lions, horses, hippopotamus, and crocodiles) by leading them and providing specific things for them. These revelations of Yahweh as the creator and faithful provider of all living creatures made Job recognize the sovereignty, righteousness, compassion, and faithfulness of Yahweh. Yahweh certainly did not reveal himself as the punisher of Job's moral and religious sins. Rather, Yahweh intended to teach him "that God's power is beyond our normal calculus, so explanation is a futile enterprise."²² For Job, the mystery of God was designed "to exhibit the fiercer, unfettered power of God."²³ Through these revelations, the book of Job makes several emphases: God's sovereign and mysterious lordship over people and nature; the limitation of human wisdom and understanding about God's activities; and divine providence. In addition, the book of Job teaches that people in general and the sufferers in particular can still trust God's goodness, righteousness, and abundant grace. They only have to be patient in awaiting God's grace and mercy.

Psalm 29 also "articulates the sweep of a divine storm that is without explanation and certainly without moral dimension (vv. 7-9a). Those who watch the storm can only join in doxology: 'How great thou art!'"²⁴ The storm and natural upheavals of the sea have the response

22. Walter Brueggemann, "A Disaster of 'Biblical' Proportions?" Religion Online, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3293> (accessed September 10, 2010).

23. Brueggemann, "A Disaster of 'Biblical' Proportions?" (accessed September 10, 2010).

24. Brueggemann, "A Disaster of 'Biblical' Proportions?"

of wonderment from gazers. Human beings can be only amazed by the divine mystery.²⁵

The main theological themes of the book of Nahum are two: (1) the destruction of Nineveh because of idolatry, sexual disorderliness, and international oppression; and (2) the salvation of the people of Judah as the result of Assyria's collapse. In order to convey these messages, Nahum introduced Yahweh as the righteous judge in front of the peoples of Nineveh and Judah (Nah 1:2-8). This phrase is part of a poem that introduces Yahweh as the main figure of the historic event, that is, the destruction of Nineveh. Yahweh is characterized not only as the righteous judge against the sinful Assyrians but also as the creator and director of the natural phenomena. He is also described as "a refuge in times of trouble," the savior of his chosen people. The poem emphasizes God's faithful presence for them.

His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and dries it up; he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade. The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him. The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood, he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness (Nah 1:3-8).

Natural Disasters Can Be Employed for the Salvation of God's People

In the Joseph story, famine (seven years in Egypt and the surrounding countries) is an important literary and theological motif to convey Yahweh's providence and salvation for the family of Jacob. In combination with divine-dream motifs and Yahweh's sovereignty, the story reveals divine mystery and irony in the midst of a natural disaster. The famine serves as a necessary background for the scenes of Joseph's reunification with his brothers and his father, and Joseph's benevolent care of his family and his forgiveness of his brothers (Gen 41-47). Therefore, the famine became an instrument of Yahweh in solving the long-lasting family feud between Joseph and his brothers and in preparing the establishment of the people of Israel.²⁶

25. Brueggemann, "A Disaster of 'Biblical' Proportions?"

26. Jung Hoon Bae, "The Old Testament and Natural Disaster," *Bible Forum* (March 2005): 35.

Yahweh employed natural disasters in order to save his people who were oppressed and persecuted by other nations. For example, most of the ten plagues executed in front of Pharaoh were natural disasters upon Egyptians who oppressed the people of Israel. The plague that changed the river of Nile into blood compounded by the plagues of frogs, gnats, flies, boils, hail, locusts, on livestock, and darkness became some of God's instruments to liberate his people from the oppression of Egyptians (Exod 7-10).

Habakkuk 3 is another example of this point. The Prophet Habakkuk, at first, complained in front of God about his decision to use the Babylonian army in order to punish the sinfulness and disobedience of the people of Judah. Then he heard and saw God's mysterious but proper timing of retaliation against Babylon because of their own sinful activities. He not only recognized the sovereignty of Yahweh over all nations but also had a conviction that Yahweh could save his own people because they trusted God even in the midst of war.

Habakkuk expressed his strong belief in God's saving power by employing the images of natural disasters and those of war. He emphasized that Yahweh could use natural disasters in order to subdue the enemies of his chosen people. He could bring plague and pestilence. He could shake the earth and make the nations tremble. He could make the ancient mountains crumble and the age-old hills collapse. He could split the earth with rivers. He could sweep away torrents of waters. He could make the sun and the moon stand still in the heavens. He could trample the sea and churn the great waters. Habakkuk confessed that Yahweh could employ natural disasters to deliver his people, his anointed ones (Hab 3:5-15).

In the New Testament, "the ground shaking that accompanied the crucifixion of Jesus, the seismic activity which moved the stone from Christ's tomb, and the earthquake that opened the doors of the prison in which the Apostle Paul and Silas were incarcerated" are some examples of natural disasters employed for the salvation of his people.²⁷ Therefore, it will be better to call these phenomena not as natural disasters but as "natural upheavals" or "natural wonders."

27. David K. Chester, "Natural Disasters and Christian Theology," (a paper presented at a seminar in the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, St. Edmund's College, University of Cambridge, n.d.), 4. Found in the Faraday Institute website: <http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/resources/FAR268%20Chester.pdf> (accessed November 11, 2010).

*Natural Disasters Become
Indicators of the Eschatological Age*

One of the main themes of the Bible is the kingdom of God. In covert and overt ways, the Bible reveals that the kingdom of God is in the process of being established in this world through his chosen messiah and his faithful followers. Old Testament prophecies focus on the first coming of the messiah in this world. The New Testament emphasizes the fulfillment of the prophecies with the first coming of the messiah. In addition, it also discloses the second coming of the same messiah and his particular activities as the sovereign Lord of all the nations along with the future history of humanity. For example, Daniel 7 shows Daniel's dream of four beasts. The dream prophesies the coming of the messiah. Most biblical scholars interpret this dream as showing the rise and fall of the human empires of Babylon, Medes, Persia, and Greece. Then the dream reveals the coming of messiah who is "the one like a son of man." In the process of proclaiming the lordship of the Ancient of Days, the imagery of natural disaster was employed. These rhetorical descriptions are strong enough to convey the purity, the mightiness, and the majesty of the Lord, the Ancient of Days.

His clothing was as white as snow, the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him (Dan 7:9-10).

Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 describe various end-of-the-age phenomena about which Jesus prophesied. In the description of the second coming of the messiah, it is implied that "the period of time that will precede Jesus' return and the establishment of the messianic Kingdom will be a time of escalating Natural Disasters, which are what Jesus called 'but the beginning of the suffering' (Matt. 24:8; Mk. 13:8)."²⁸ Famines, earthquakes, and humanity's tumults become standard apocalyptic *topoi*.²⁹

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be

28. Carol Brooks, "Natural Disasters and a Benevolent God," Inplainsite.org, http://www.inplainsite.org/html/natural_disasters.html (accessed November 11, 2010).

29. Thomas Kazen, "Standing Helpless at the Roar and Surging of the Sea," 35; Lars Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted: The Formation of Some Jewish Apocalyptic Texts and of the Eschatological Discourse Mark 13 Par.* Coniectanea Biblica New Testament (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1966), 233-235.

famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains (Matt 24:6-8).

The book of Revelation also vividly describes the scenes of the righteous judgment of the Lamb at the end of human history against the unfaithful ones and the ones who apostatized in times of persecution. During the eschatological times in which the Lamb is performing the final judgment, the following natural disasters are executed by the horse riders and the angels: famine (Rev 6:8), a great earthquake, the sun blackening, the moon becoming blood red (Rev 6:12), stars falling from the sky (Rev 6:13), the sky receding like a scroll, mountains and islands moving from their locations (Rev 6:14), hail and fire mixing with blood (Rev 8:7), a huge mountain set ablaze tossing into the sea causing the sea to turn into blood (Rev 8:8), a great blazing star falling from the sky landing on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water (Rev 8:10), and finally, locusts swarming from the Abyss (Rev 9:3).

*Natural Disasters Are
an Integral Part of God's Way of
Creating and Preserving the World*

In the first chapter of his book, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*, Terence E. Fretheim thoroughly studies the modes of creation in Genesis 1-2. His argument is strengthened by the discussion of Job's suffering. I consider his argument to be worth mentioning here since it helps us to widen our viewpoint not only about the modes of God's creation but also about the possibility and inevitability of natural disasters.

- 1) *God uses already-existing matter in creating.* The images of Genesis 1-2 bring together God, raw material, and movement to signal a dynamic rather than a static sense to creation, an open process rather than one tightly controlled.³⁰
- 2) *God calls upon already-existing creatures to bring about new creations.* For example, in Genesis 1:11-13, God invites, "Let the earth put forth," and we are told, "The earth brought forth." The earth is coparticipant with God in creation (see 1:20, 24) at God's explicit invitation. This story of the

30. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 67-68. For example, the spirit of God moves over the face of the waters; or God assumes human form (see 3:8) and shapes the ground into a human being (2:7); or God creates the woman out of the rib (or side) of the man. Human beings (and other creatures) are brought into being out of already-existing creatures.

creation has been repeated over the millennia as ever-new creatures have come into being through the mediation of existing creatures.

- 3) *God invites the divine council to participate in the creation of the human.* This interdependent way of creating is extended in Genesis 1:26, “Let us make,” where God involves the divine council. God here creates communally.
- 4) *God involves the human in still-further acts of creation.* The word “God” in Genesis 1 primarily has reference to God as the one who creates. It follows that those created in the image of such a God are most fundamentally creative beings. As we have seen, this human creativity is illustrated in Genesis 1:28; 2:5, 15, 18-20; and 4:1. Human beings are given a crucial role in enabling the creation to become what God intends.³¹

In the discussion of the book of Job, Fretheim indicates that some of Job’s suffering was caused by natural disasters such as fire, lightning, windstorm, and disease (Job 1:13-19; 2:7). Then, after explaining theological conflicts between Job and his three friends, he argues as follows:

Yet since natural disasters are a key cause of Job’s suffering, and since the friends’ point of view is negatively evaluated, the book suggests that natural disasters are, generally, not due to sin and its effects. Such suffering is due to being a part of a complex natural order that God has created. The God speeches . . . make it clear that the creation is not as rigidly fixed as the friends claim or as chaotic as Job thinks.³²

The world that God created is not (and never has been) a risk-free place, and God has not provided danger-free zones for righteous people such as Job. Indeed, God has created a world that has significant, if limited, elements of disorderliness, which can adversely affect its inhabitants (both human and non human). This disorder and randomness is an integral part of “the warp and woof of the cosmic fabric.” God’s creation is a dynamic environment, with all sorts of turbulence in its becoming, and these events have the capacity to bring suffering to human beings (and animals).³³

Therefore, according to Fretheim, “God has chosen to use human and nonhuman agents in continuing to work creatively in the world,” and “God shows that Job and his friends cannot simply relate to issues

31. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 67-68.

32. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 73-74.

33. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 81.

of suffering through the lens of human sinfulness and related issues of justice.”³⁴ Fretheim’s interpretation of the book of Job in general, and that of human suffering caused by natural disasters, help us to eliminate the rigid view of connecting every natural disaster to God’s retribution and judgment on the moral, religious, and social sinfulness of humankind. As a result, his interpretations tell us not to judge or condemn the sufferers of natural disasters but to approach them with comforting hearts. In addition, these help us to acknowledge the privileges and the responsibilities of human beings and nature. They preserve and continually create this world to become a better place.

This view in some ways can be associated with “the best of all possible worlds theodicy,” which was emphasized by Irenaeus, Leibniz, Voltaire, F. J. Murphy, and John Hick. The proponents of the best of all possible worlds theodicy argue as follows:

The universe is controlled by the laws of physics and not by special laws (i.e. providences). Despite the suffering caused by disasters, the earth is the *Best Possible World* (Leibniz) that could be created. Suffering occurs to achieve a *greater good* (e.g. without earthquakes tectonic activity would not be possible and without volcanic activity no atmosphere would have formed). The occurrence and magnitude of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions obey the laws of probability. Our ‘law controlled’ world facilitates spiritual growth, through dealing with suffering.³⁵

As Christians, if we replace the laws of physics by the providence of God, the best possible world theodicy is a good way of explaining the relationship between the natural disasters and God’s good creation and preservation of this world, which is still in the process. According to this view, Murphy’s statement is convincing: it “would probably be impossible to design any system of nature which did not have the potential to injure unsuspecting humans,” and “God’s purpose is to accept disasters and use them to complete a greater good.”³⁶ Hick’s understanding of suffering as a learning experience of our virtues in order to develop our moral nature (such as compassion, love, and self-giving for others) and, therefore, as a process of “soul-making” reaching to an end state of perfected personal community in the divine kingdom, also shows a similar view of the natural disasters.³⁷

34. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 84-85.

35. Chester, “Natural Disasters and Christian Theology,” 2.

36. Chester, “Natural Disasters and Christian Theology,” 10. F. J. Murphy, “Unknowable World: Solving the Problem of Natural Evil,” *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 345.

37. Hick, “Soul-Making Theodicy,” 309, 312.

In his book, *Evil, Suffering and Religion*, Brian Hebblethwaite agrees with Hick on this matter. Then his argument advances one step further with an eschatological viewpoint. After raising the question, “Why does God create a physical world which, for all its wonders and beauties, can also cause untold harm to sentient beings?” he describes as follows:

The properties of nature which cause harm to creatures are precisely the same fundamental properties which make possible an organic world of growth and change . . . But there is another line of argument, based on the idea that creation is an on-going process leading to a future goal, which also needs to be taken into account. This line of argument . . . cannot explain why evil and suffering exist in present experience . . . But reflection on the ultimate future goal of creation can perhaps help with the problem of justification—the problem, that is, of showing why the great cost of creation in present evil and suffering is worthwhile.³⁸

Sometimes God also Suffers in Natural Disasters

When we discuss various meanings of natural disasters, a particular aspect should be added for the practical application of this discussion: God’s suffering in natural disasters. In the flood story of Genesis 6-9, natural disasters were used as agents of God’s righteous judgment against the sins and corruptions of human beings. God expressed his emotions, such as regret and grief, and his experience of suffering. The story revealed God as one who was affected by creatures (human and nonhuman) and hurt by the sins of humanity.³⁹ God also showed his regret in creating humankind (Gen 6:6-7). God’s heart was filled with pain. The word, pain (‘tsav), is the same Hebrew word used for the “pain” of the man and woman in Genesis 3:16-17.⁴⁰ Therefore, “while the external and more objective picture in this story is one of disastrous judgment, the internal, subjective image is that of divine grief.”⁴¹

Another example of the relatedness of God’s judgment and his grief can be found in Jeremiah 9:10: “I will weep and wail for the mountains and take up a lament concerning the desert pastures. They are desolate and untraveled, and the lowing of cattle is not heard. The birds of the air have fled and the animals are gone.” One can say, therefore, that divine judgment and divine tears go together.⁴² His divine characters

38. Brian Hebblethwaite, *Evil, Suffering and Religion* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1976), 53-54.

39. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 57.

40. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 59.

41. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 60.

42. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 60.

of righteousness and merciful compassion go together. His willingness of executing divine judgment against the sinful people and of forgiving them and giving them another chance at a new beginning after the judgment go together. This kind of God's pain, agony and suffering is expressed so vividly in Hosea 11:8-9 toward the sinful people of Israel.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor devastate Ephraim again, For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you, I will not come in wrath.

God's gracious decision to cope continually with the sinful people by responding not only with righteous judgment but also with the allowance of a new promise and a new beginning results in his own pain, grief, and suffering of the heart. In the flood story, divine pain implies and visualizes God's suffering in the midst of the natural disasters activated by God's righteous judgment. Then, his gracious decision to establish a new promise follows after his experience of pain and suffering. Even though God may perform his righteous judgment against sinful human beings, it is not the final act of God. Rather, God offered a new promise to Noah, his descendants, and every living creature (Gen 9:10). This understanding of God's character and actions makes us interpret the meaning of natural disasters in a composite way. It helps us to recognize the importance of ministering to the victims of natural disasters not with a judgmental spirit but with the spirit of healing and encouragement, as God has shown in the flood story.

Applications for the Christian Ministry and Mission

Theological discussions may be finally completed when they offer practical contributions to the Christian ministries and mission. Otherwise, the discussions will be mere "theological jargons in the ivory tower." They cannot offer any life-giving, life-curing, or community-building power to the people in need. Therefore, our discussions of the meanings of natural disasters should offer some practical applications for the ones who are ministering to the victims and survivors of natural disasters.

Firstly, theologians and ministers have to provide a balanced theological view about the meaning of natural disasters. For this matter, we should consider the *Sitz im Leben* of the victims as well as various biblical viewpoints of natural disasters. It is not wise to proclaim solely that natural disasters are the judgments of God without considering other possible interpretations as we have seen in this paper. Furthermore, it is

also unwise to preach only retribution without any considerations of the social, economic, moral, and religious situations of the victims and the survivors. As we have discussed before, the Bible does not proclaim that natural disasters have a clear and general meaning that can be applied to all people. If we try to find a convincing significance of natural disasters for everyone, with a presupposition that there is an ultimate meaning, we will end up arguing endlessly in vain without any solution. Therefore, we have to find the divine meaning of natural disasters while also considering the existential situations of the particular community which is experiencing the natural disasters.⁴³

Also, the aspect of time needs to be considered in order to provide a better ministry to victims and survivors. We can preach that natural disasters are the judgments of God to punish their moral and religious sins while victims and sufferers are in agony. However, this approach will not gain a positive response from listeners. Our prophetic challenge in the midst of natural disasters might simply engender more pain for them.⁴⁴ Alternatively, messages of divine comfort and healing will be more receptive. The theme of God's judgment and righteous retribution can be taught later with the connecting themes of repentance and its blessings.

The consideration of who the listeners are is also essential for maintaining a balanced view of natural disasters. It is belated and ineffective to say that the natural disasters are punishments from God to scourge their sins because deceased victims do not have the chance to repent. The themes of the judgment of God and repentance should be taught and emphasized quite ahead of time before natural disasters happen or after the healing ministry for victims and survivors. Furthermore, it is impossible for us to evaluate each person's moral and religious righteousness. It is also not appropriate for us to proclaim solely that natural disasters occurred because victims' sins. We have to bear in mind that many victims of the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami were Christian tourists from Europe and America. Some of them were sincere Christians who believed in God as their gracious father. Therefore, it is quite unconvincing to interpret the disaster solely as the judgment of God against the sinners who worshipped idols and committed moral sins. In addition, this type of theologically oriented interpretation is remote and incomprehensible to the ears of non-believers. For them, the comforting words and helping hands will be more effective to have them think about the necessity of God's mercy and grace. Therefore, we must

43. Bae, "The Old Testament and Natural Disaster," 39.

44. Ronald Allen, "How We Respond to Natural Disaster," *Theology Today* 38, no. 4 (1982): 464.

be careful and wise in interpreting the meaning of natural disasters in the face of the victims, sufferers, and their families when they ask for logical answers. In such cases, sometimes, teaching the themes of the limits of human wisdom and understanding on God's sovereign, mysterious lordship will be better suited as in the case of Job. Then we may add that we can still trust God's goodness, righteousness, and abundant grace upon people and nature. We have to be patient in waiting for God's grace and mercy.

As we talk about and proclaim the theological meaning of natural disasters in front of affected people, the aspect of attitude should also be taken into account. The spirits of judgment and apathy, expressed by theological interpreters, can be sensed by victims. The spirits of sympathy and divine compassion shown by Christian ministers and missionaries, in contrast, can also be felt by the victims and their families. The latter enables many positive results. Christian leaders must not neglect to teach the themes of environmental responsibilities of human beings in relation to natural disasters. It is an essential theme to be emphasized including the eschatological recovery of the goodness of creation in order to preserve the harmony of this world, all the living creatures, and people.

Secondly, ministries to the victims and survivors of natural disasters should be performed not only through words but also through action. In the midst of natural disasters, the question of "how do we help and heal the victims and survivors?" is as important as that of "why do these natural disasters happen?" In times of peace, natural order, and calmness, Christian ministers and missionaries have to become theologians who delve into the various meanings of natural disasters. In times of natural disasters, they have to become activists and practitioners who can provide the practical needs of victims and survivors. They can minister to the physical needs of the victims and survivors by rescuing people at risk, helping in clean-up, and providing food, clothing, and shelter.⁴⁵ This ministry can be and should be activated not only as individuals but also as a community of faith. The community can minister to the emotional needs of victims and survivors by comforting them, and helping them to recognize and express their anxiety, anger, and depression. Members of the community can minister to organizational needs by serving as leaders and "by organizing distribution centers, establishing food relief programs, generating resources, and serving as funnels for the donations pouring into the disaster area from other churches, com-

45. Cecil Bradfield, Mary Lou Wylie, and Lennis G. Echterling, "After the Flood: The Response of Ministers to a National Disaster," *Sociological Analysis* 49 (1989): 399.

munities, and organizations.”⁴⁶ Ministering to the spiritual needs of the victims and their families is another important role of the Christian ministers and missionaries. They can help by correctly interpreting the meanings of natural disasters. This is an especially crucial and unique role of Christian ministers and missionaries. Most of the victims and their families, after raising many theological questions, are waiting for proper answers from the religious leaders.

Again, God shows his pain and suffering in the midst of natural disasters. This leaves us with an important application for Christian ministers and missionaries. God showed his compassion and sympathy through his own heartbreak and weeping for sinful Israel (who were facing natural disasters because of God’s righteous judgment). We, too, have to show our compassion and sympathy by uniting our hearts for the victims. God is the one who is distressed in times when his people are suffering (Isa 63:9). We should also be participants of the suffering when the victims of natural disasters are in pain and agony. Two biblical examples indicate the importance of our ministry based on divine compassion and sympathy: Jesus’ weeping with Lazarus’ sisters for Lazarus’ death (John 11: 35), and Paul’s admonition, “mourn with those who mourn” (Rom 12:15). We have to follow the ministry of our Lord Jesus, who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb 4:15).

This discussion also compels us recognize the importance and effectiveness of the ministry of lamenting together with the victims and their families. The power of lament is enormous. As Larry Graham points out, lament is “the beginning of a private and public process of coming to terms with catastrophe and disaster and of mending the web of existence that has been torn or blown away.”⁴⁷ Lament provides the starting point of interpreting and responding to loss. Grieving and mourning for loss become necessary in order for consolation and comfort to become possible.⁴⁸ It can support the victims’ life of faith by

offering a needed language of pain; confirming the value of embodied life; granting permission to grieve and protest; challenging inadequate understanding of God and preparing the way for new understandings;

46. Bradfield, Wylie and Echterling, “After the Flood,” 400-401.

47. Larry K. Graham, “Pastoral Theology and Catastrophic Disaster,” *The Journal of Pastoral Theology* 16, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 5.

48. Larry K. Graham, “Pastoral Theology and Catastrophic Disaster,” 6. Herbert Anderson and Kenneth Mitchell’s description is worth noting: “Those who mourn can be blessed because they can be comforted. It is difficult, if not impossible, to comfort someone who does not mourn.” Herbert Anderson and Kenneth Mitchell, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 166.

strengthening our self-understandings as responsible agents; purifying anger and the desire for vengeance; increasing solidarity with others who suffer; and revitalizing praise and hope.⁴⁹

Christian ministers can help the victims and their families to express their broken hearts through prayers of lamentation before God. They can heal them personally, communally, and in faith.

49. K. Billman and D. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999), 104ff.