

“Wise About Our World” (or “God on Trial”)  
Romans 8:19-22

I said last Sunday that in this week’s message I’d put God “on trial.” A number of you came to me afterwards and asked, “You’re doing what?” I said, “I’m putting God on trial on January 30.” Many people are doing that very thing, putting God on trial for the calamity of December 26, when an earthquake and subsequent tsunami led to the death of more than 226,000 people (although the final death toll may never be known). Over one-third of those dead are children. The charge is this: How can God allow something like this to happen? I did a good bit of research on the Internet this week, and I found quite a number of statements condemning the accused for what happened: “God, if there is a God, should be ashamed of Himself.” “What kind of God is it who can do such things?” “I’ve been a Christian all my life, but after this, I don’t want to have anything to do with God.” “Is God really a God of love?” “I hope I’m right when I say there is no God. For if there were, He’d have to shoulder the blame. In my book, he would be as guilty as sin and I’d want nothing to do with Him.” These are raw, angry accusations. What is God’s response?

Before we get to that question, a few introductory comments are in order. First, it’s important for us to gain any insight and wisdom from God that we can on this matter because an event like this can have a dramatic and long-lasting impact on our world. Let me give you an example. You know that most of the founding fathers of our country were deists. I remember deism being explained to me like this: Creation is like a clock. God created the clock, and He wound it up to ensure that it would work. (Young people, you may not know that before batteries, you wound up a clock. For you, the example would be, God created the clock and put a battery in it.) God then set the clock over on His desk, and He moved on to other things. Deism affirms a belief in God. He is the Creator of the universe and the Creator of its natural laws, but He does not participate in His creation, or care about His creation or the people that live in it. Deism was a minority, a “fringe” view of God that wasn’t taken too seriously in the western world in the 1700s until November 1, 1755. What happened on that date? On November 1, 1755, there was a massive earthquake that resulted in a tsunami off the coast of Lisbon, Portugal. The earthquake and tidal wave resulted in the deaths of more than 100,000 people and sent spiritual and philosophical shock waves through Europe. “How could a God who cares about His creation, about men and women, boys and girls, allow something like this to happen?” The answer to that question in 1755 and the years afterwards was that He doesn’t care, He’s not involved. Deism became the popular and prevalent view of God in the western world. An event like this can have an historic, lasting impact. Second, we have to acknowledge that God doesn’t “owe us” an explanation for what happened. In Job 41:11 God asks, “Who has a claim against Me that I must pay?” Of course the answer is that no one does, no one has a claim on God that He is their debtor. He doesn’t “owe us” an explanation for what has happened. Third, even as we grapple with God and what He tells us in a situation like this, we do not know and cannot know Him and His ways completely and exhaustively. He is God, infinite, that is limitless in His wisdom, His knowledge, His understanding. We are not, not God, not infinite. There’s a limit to our wisdom, knowledge and understanding. Here’s how God expresses the difference in Isaiah 55:8-9: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (also Romans 11:33). The “gap” between God’s thoughts and ways and our thoughts and ways is what John Calvin called “mystery.” “Mystery” tells us we can’t know all the answers to all our questions on this side of eternity. In this life, there are knowledge, wisdom, and understanding about God that are simply beyond us. At that place, you have to decide if you will trust in God, or trust in someone (or something) else. Given these introductory thoughts, I have two insights God has chosen to tell us about our world, and in particular, about natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. You and I are wise to know and understand and, as we’ll see, act on what He’s told us.

First, creation has been corrupted by sin (Romans 8:18-22). We typically think of sin in a personal way. It’s something we do, and we also think of the impact of our sin in a personal way as well. The results of sin in my life include brokenness in my relationship with God. Sin results in my physical death. Sin, being abhorrent to God, brings upon me His eternal punishment and damnation. I sin; there are consequences to that sin that affect my life. This is all true, but it’s not the whole story. Sin is not just personal, it has a broader impact, in that sin

affects all of creation! Genesis chapter three tells us that when Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God's command, not only mankind (all men, women, boys, and girls), but the whole creation was affected by that first sin. At that point, sin entered the world. God said to Adam beginning in verse 17: "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' Cursed are you." No, that's not what God said. He said, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:17-19). Before sin entered the world there existed no "thorns or thistles," no weeds or poisonous plants, nothing existed that could cause mankind misery or harm. But now, because of sin, no part of nature now exists as God intended it to be and as it originally was. The world is corrupted, in "bondage to decay," Romans 8:21 tells us. The evidences of this reality include deadly diseases, earthquakes, cyclones, floods, and tsunamis. God's response to these incredibly destructive and devastating forces is not to turn His back on them, but to solve them. Natural evil is a part of the problem to which God's plan of salvation is the answer. The magnitude of the problem was so great that it required the death, the death of God's own Son. In Jesus Christ, we see God emptying Himself of glory and majesty and perfection and entering into this corrupted world and embracing the pain, suffering, and evil caused by sin. At the cross, Jesus took upon Himself and defeated sin, its power and impact on our lives. At the cross, Jesus "was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed," Isaiah 53:5 tells us. There's the individual, personal application of God's solution to sin. But look at Colossians 1:19-20, which speaks of Jesus reconciling to Himself" (that is, restoring to Himself in perfect harmony) "all things, things on earth and things in heaven." How does He do this? "By making peace through His blood, shed on the cross." Verse 22 of Romans 8 tells us that all creation awaits this reconciling of all things, and as it waits, its corruption and decay have been changed. It is still terrible, but now natural evil is likened to the pains of childbirth. The destruction and misery of those pains may seem intolerable. But now in Christ they are a part of the birth of a new heaven and a new earth, which will come when Jesus comes again (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). Sin has corrupted God's creation, producing incredible natural evil. Christ came to liberate us, to liberate that creation from the power and consequences of sin.

The second insight from God is Jesus' own response to a natural calamity that happened during His ministry. Turn with me if you will to Luke 13:1-5. Let me set the context of this passage. The prevailing wisdom in Jesus' time was that a disaster falling on someone was the direct result of their own sin. In other words, God must be really angry at your sinfulness to end your life in a catastrophic fashion. Conversely, being spared calamity is evidence of God's favor and protection. Luke 13:1-5 says, "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.'" This is obviously not a natural disaster. But then Jesus speaks to one, a terrible accident in which a tower at the southeast corner of Jerusalem had collapsed: He asks, "Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." Jesus says that calamity is not a time to put those who died on trial (nor, would I add, is it time to put God on trial). Natural disaster reminds us that death is the point at which we all meet. All mankind meets at death. Some are allowed to see death coming over days, weeks, even months. For others, death comes in an instant, unexpected, without warning. But death comes, to all of us. Death will come. What's important in the face of death, Jesus says, is whether or not you've repented. Every calamity is a call from Jesus Christ for the living to repent. Jesus says that if you have not repented of your sin and turned to God, if you have not entered into a relationship with Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Lord, then when you die, you too will perish, perish into everlasting death and damnation that is life in Hell! But if you have repented, if you have turned to and embraced the Christ who endured the pain, suffering, evil, and agony for you on the cross, then for you is the hope and the assurance that you will not perish, but will have eternal life. Every calamity is a call from Jesus Christ for the living to repent. Have you done that? In response to His call, have you received Jesus as your personal Savior and Lord?