

Why does a God of love allow disasters to happen?

Reading: Genesis 41: 1-40, 47-49, 53-57

SCRIPT

[Slide 1]

We see disasters on our TV screens and in our newspapers on a regular basis.

In 2020 there were droughts, floods, and storms across Latin America, Asia and Africa, as well as protracted conflicts and the impact of Covid-19 across the world.

[Slide 2]

The Christian, international children's charity World Vision UK responded to emergencies in 24 countries during the year, supporting over a million people.

Some of these are large scale disasters that we hear about in the UK, but there are many communities that face smaller scale disasters – floods and droughts, that don't make the news but can cause devastation. We see events in this country, with flooding in different parts of the UK becoming a regular occurrence, and these cause misery for those involved, but we also know that in other parts of the world floods, droughts, and storms cause much greater misery and suffering for people.

We often call these events 'Natural Disasters' or we use the term 'Acts of God'.

But as Christians we believe in a God of Love, so why does He let disasters happen? It is easy to be a bit glib about this, and just say that God knows more than us and we don't understand his purposes, but actually I think this issue presents us with quite a challenge, and one that many of us as Christians, as well as those who don't necessarily share our faith, struggle to reconcile.

So we are going to look at this a bit more closely this [morning/afternoon/evening].

[Slide 3]

First of all:

- We'll look at what people often say about disasters – and particularly what some Christians might say
- Then we'll look at what the Bible says about why disasters might happen
- Then we'll look at what the academics say – the theory of disasters
- After that we'll have a closer look at a particular story from the Bible to see how Joseph was able to prevent a major disaster happening in Egypt, and what that story can teach us
- And finally, we will have a look at some work that the charity World Vision has been doing in Uganda to help local communities be better prepared for disasters so that they don't have such a devastating effect

So, to begin with – what do people say about disasters?

For some people, they believe disasters are God's punishment, the result of sin.

[Slide 4]

For example:

The American TV Preacher Pat Robertson said that the Haiti earthquake in 2010 was due to the people of Haiti having a 'Pact with the Devil'.

In 2012 a UKIP local Councillor wrote to David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, to say that the floods in the UK were due to the passing of the Same Sex Marriage law.

So, are disasters the result of Sin? What does the Bible say?

In the Old Testament there is the story of Job, who was a good, righteous man, but had to face a number of calamities, or disasters in his life. His friends thought that all this happened to him because of sin.

In Job chapter 22, verse 5 Job's friend Eliphaz says:

"Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?"

However, the full story shows that this is not the case and Job had not sinned to cause all the distress that came on his life. He was in fact a good, faithful man, and God allowed these things to happen to him not because of sin, but because God knew he would remain faithful to God even through these calamitous events.

In Luke's Gospel, there is the story of the Tower of Siloam, a tower which collapsed, killing 18 people. Jesus rejects the view that they were worse sinners than others, and that was the reason they had died. Jesus says that we are all sinners and we all need to repent. We cannot sit in judgement over those who are suffering and suggest that their sins are the reason for their suffering, as a direct punishment from God.

In Matthew 5 Jesus declares that the sun rises on the evil and the good and the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous. God doesn't target particular people, good and bad circumstances and situations happen to us all, not because some may have sinned or are worse than others or more deserving of punishment.

So, the Bible seems to reject the idea that disasters are the direct result of sin, but many people still tend to hold on to the idea that bad things happen to us as a form of punishment.

Now, there is an argument that disasters do happen as a result of sin, but not necessarily the sin of those who suffer. But we will come back to that later.

So, if disasters are not caused by sin and God's judgement – why do they happen?

Disasters are often referred to as 'Natural Disasters' – and we think of events such as floods, droughts, earthquakes, cyclones and hurricanes as 'Natural Disasters'.

But in fact, there is nothing 'natural' about a disaster.

Floods, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes are 'hazards'

These are natural events, but they don't necessarily have to result in a disaster.

A disaster occurs when there is a hazard but also when people are particularly vulnerable to that hazard.

In other words:

[Slide 5]

HAZARD	X	VULNERABILITY	=	DISASTER
A Hazard	together with	a Vulnerability	results in	a disaster

So a similar hazard can cause a major disaster in some places and a much less severe event elsewhere, where people are less vulnerable.

To illustrate this, we will look at some disasters from the past:

[Slide 6]

In 2010 there was the earthquake in Haiti that I have already mentioned, which Pat Robertson blamed on a pact with the Devil. The earthquake killed around 150,000 people.

[Slide 7]

Soon afterwards an earthquake of a very similar magnitude hit Chile, but only 525 died.

There were perhaps some differences in the scale of the earthquake, but by far the biggest difference was the vulnerability of the people.

Chile is a more developed, wealthier country than Haiti and has much better regulations on construction to make buildings more earthquake resistant, and they are also able to enforce those regulations.

Haiti is very poor, with a long history of poor governance, with many people living in poor standard housing and weak infrastructure. The earthquake therefore caused a much bigger disaster in Haiti than Chile due to the much greater vulnerabilities in Haiti.

Also, vulnerabilities can change over time.

[Slide 8]

Bangladesh was hit by a large cyclone in 1991 that killed 138,000 people.

[Slide 9]

In 2007 a very similar cyclone hit much the same parts of the country, but only 3,447 people died.

So why such a difference between the two cyclones?

This is largely due to Bangladesh putting a lot of work into reducing people's vulnerabilities to cyclones in the 15 years or so between the two events.

Bangladesh established Early Warning Systems so people could know in advance that cyclones were coming. Also, cyclone shelters were built where people could stay for a few days while the cyclone passed through. Plus, a lot of work had been done to make sure people knew what to do when they heard the early warnings. All of this was a combination of the Bangladesh government, community groups and charitable organisations working together. Although the 2007 cyclone still caused a lot of damage, far fewer people lost their lives.

So while hazards are natural, disasters are not, they are caused by people's vulnerability.

People can be vulnerable to hazards for a variety of reasons, but a lot of those reasons are connected to poverty, and the lack of choices that come from being poor. It is usually the poorest and most marginalised who live in places most vulnerable to flooding, for example, and who have the least resources to be able to cope with and recover from a disaster. And because the most marginalised have little in the way of a voice that is heard by those in power, little is done to protect them from potential disasters.

And in recent years, climate change has been making hazards more intense and more frequent, but it is still the most vulnerable people who are the most badly affected. And with disaster events becoming more frequent, it gives even less time for people to recover from one event before another one comes along, pushing people and their communities further into poverty and vulnerability.

Which brings us back to Sin.

Climate change is an issue that has largely been caused by the wealthiest countries in the world, through our history of emitting carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, which continues to this day. However, the most negative consequences of climate change are felt most by those least responsible, particularly those who suffer the impacts of the droughts, floods and storms that are result.

Maybe in the past we weren't necessarily aware of the consequences of our actions in terms of climate change, but we are certainly very much aware now. Our desire for continuing economic growth, fuelled by rampant consumerism, greed and a disregard for the environment around us and across the world can be seen as sin, as we ignore Jesus' instructions to love our neighbours as ourselves.

And so, yes perhaps disasters are a consequence of sin, but unfortunately it isn't those who sin who are the victims.

However, as we saw from the case of Bangladesh, there are things that can be done to reduce people's vulnerabilities:

[Slide 10]

- Being better prepared
- Mitigating risks
- Building resilience

The Bible reading we had earlier illustrates this quite well. Perhaps it could be known as:

[Slide 11]

"Joseph and his Amazing, Technicoloured Drought Management Policy"

It's the story of Pharaoh's dream, where there were:

- The 7 fat cows and the 7 thin cows, and
- The 7 healthy heads of grain and the 7 thin heads of grain

This represented 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of famine.

Joseph was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams and so was put in charge of Egypt's response to the situation.

Joseph put in place a system to save food from the years of plenty so that there was enough food to cope with the years of famine. So although there were 7 bad years, good management of resources during the previous 7 good years averted a disaster.

So Joseph had an effective Early Warning System, in the dreams of Pharaoh and God helping him to interpret those dreams. Egypt was therefore better prepared for the 7 bad years by keeping stocks of food from the 7 good years.

They were able to mitigate the risks from the 7 bad years and ensure that the people of Egypt were not as vulnerable as those in the surrounding countries, which included Joseph's family who fled Israel for Egypt in search of food.

By taking positive action ahead of time, Joseph was able to prevent a disaster, even though they faced a severe hazard.

World Vision is following in this great Biblical tradition by working with communities around the world to help them manage better in the face of a variety of different hazards.

[Slide 12]

In Uganda they worked with the Ugandan National Meteorological Authority and other parts the Ugandan Government in a project funded by UK Aid, through a UK Met Office programme called 'WISER'.

In Uganda the Government had been producing weather forecasts, including seasonal forecasts to give people essential information about upcoming rainy seasons. Unfortunately, this information was provided in English, and using highly technical language, so has not been helpful for most Ugandans, especially the rural poor, who are the most vulnerable to droughts and floods and the changing seasons and weather patterns resulting from climate change.

So World Vision worked with the Ugandan Met Authority to translate these forecasts into 22 local languages, and with the local authorities in 22 different districts, as well as local radio stations, community groups, faith leaders and community leaders to make sure that the information was widely available. The project also provided advice for farmers on what they can do in response to the forecast information.

This has enabled poor farmers to be better prepared for periods of too little or too much rain – bringing some more certainty at a time when climate change is creating more uncertain about seasons, climate and weather.

[Slide 13]

By the end of the project over 200,000 people had been reached directly with the translated weather and climate information across those 22 districts.

At the beginning of the project only 13% of farmers in these districts felt that the forecasts they received were accurate and relevant, but at the end of this 18 month project this had increased to 78%. In addition, over 80% of the farmers who received the improved information took positive actions to improve their resilience as a result. So over 160,000 farmers have now adopted new practices such as:

- Choosing particular crop varieties to plant
- Planting on recommended dates
- Taking pest control measures
- Using soil conservation techniques
- Planting trees

So this improved information, together with a lot of other activities that World Vision is doing to support farmers, will help them to adapt to climate change and be more resilient to disasters that might happen in the future.

So, as I close, I would like you to remember:

[Slide 14]

- Disasters aren't a punishment from God
- We can help people to be less vulnerable to natural hazards
- Action on climate change will help to make the poorest less vulnerable

[Slide 15]

- Please pray for farmers in countries like Uganda, that they will have access to information that will help them to make better decisions about what to plant and when
- Pray for governments, communities and organisations like World Vision as they help people rebuild after disasters— so that they will be more resilient to similar events in the future