

Did God Punish the Philippines with Typhoon Yolanda?

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Introduction

In 2005 Hurricane Katrina claimed at least 1,800 lives. Commenting on this disaster, Pat Robertson, the host of the 700 Club, said that God was punishing Americans with this hurricane. In 2010 a powerful earthquake shook Haiti, killing more than 100,000 people. Again Robertson stated that this earthquake was a form of divine judgment.

Recently my native land, the Philippines, was hit by Super Typhoon Haiyan, locally known as Yolanda. As of November 17, the death toll from this typhoon is now close to 4,000. Jim Solouki, a blogger, is convinced that this disaster was also a divine punishment. Solouki writes, “Did you know that God is punishing the Philippines for their tolerance of homosexuality, prostitution, Catholicism, and other sins?”

Did God Punish the Philippines with Typhoon Yolanda? I will answer that question by looking at Christ’s teachings concerning disasters as found in Luke 13:1-5. Let’s read this text:

¹There were some present at that very time who told him [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And he [Jesus] answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

In this passage Jesus gives at least five basic teachings on disasters.

1. Jesus does not want us to think that those who die in disasters are worse sinners than we are.

There are two kinds of disaster mentioned in our passage: moral & natural.

a. Moral (or man-made) disaster (vv. 1-3)

In verse one some of the people in the crowds inform Jesus of the Galileans who were murdered by Pilate. We do not know much about this incident. But we can imagine that these Galileans went down south to Jerusalem to offer their animal sacrifices to God in the temple. At this time Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea where the temple of Jerusalem was situated. For some reason Pilate slaughtered these Galileans. Hence, we read in verse one that their blood was mixed with the blood of their animal sacrifices. What a horrible way to die!

Now, the people informing Jesus of this event believe that these Galileans died in this terrible way because they were exceptionally wicked compared to other Galileans. To correct their belief, Jesus asks them rhetorically, “Do you think that these Galileans [who were slain] were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?” (v.2). The answer is, of course, no (v. 3).

In 2009 fifty-eight Filipinos were brutally killed in the Maguindanao massacre, also known as the Ampatuan massacre. Jesus does not want us to think that these Filipinos deserved to die in this manner because they were worse sinners than other Filipinos. He does not approve of making a hasty judgment upon the character of the victims of moral disasters.

b. Natural (or God-made) disaster (vv. 4-5)

The second kind of disaster recorded in our text is what we call a natural disaster. Let me clarify the difference between moral and natural disasters. A classic example of a moral disaster is the holocaust, or the September 11 Attacks. Examples of natural disasters include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, tornados, typhoons, and others. In verse four we encounter another type of natural disaster: the fall of the tower in Siloam. Look at verse four again: “Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?”

Like the murder of the Galileans, we also do not know much about this event. However, the message of Jesus is clear: Do not think that those who were killed by the fall of the tower in Siloam were greater sinners than all the others who lived in Jerusalem. In other words, Jesus forbids us to think that we are *morally* better than those who were struck by Typhoon Yolanda and that they deserved it more than we did.

2. Jesus does not want us to think that we are *racially* superior to those who suffer in disasters.

The informers in our text who came to Jesus were most likely from Jerusalem. Now lest these Jerusalemites think that the Galileans had a dreadful death because of their ethnicity, Jesus adds the incident of the fall of the tower. This natural disaster killed eighteen Jerusalemites. Here’s the message of Jesus to his audience: You, Jerusalemites, don’t think that those Galileans who were murdered were an inferior group of people. Don’t think that you are ethnically better than they were. Remember that even your fellow Jerusalemites also had an awful death.

To apply this message to us, the people in Quezon City, for example, should not conclude that they are better than those who live in Tacloban City, an area severely damaged by Typhoon Yolanda. Likewise, Jesus prohibits you, you who are not Filipinos, to think that you

are better than the Filipinos because their land was hit by a powerful storm. Regardless of our nationality, in God's sight we are all equal, for we were all created in his image.

3. Jesus does not want us to think that disasters are absolute indicators of God's punishment.

Among the first-century Jews was a common notion that the Galileans were massacred because of their great sin. Jesus, however, does not focus on the sin of these Galileans. Yes, Jesus does not deny the fact that they were sinners. But he denies the opinion that they died in an awful way because they had committed great sin. Thus, Jesus does not encourage us to think that disasters are definitive indications of divine judgment.

In Acts 7:54-60 we read about the stoning of Stephen. Some might say, "God must have punished Stephen for his sin because of the manner of his death—he was stoned to death." Well, we know that Stephen was stoned to death, not because of his sin against God, but because of his faith in Jesus. In short, the stoning was not a sign of God's judgment upon Stephen, but a manifestation of Stephen's love for Christ.

In Job 1:18-19 we are told that Job's ten children died from a natural disaster. A messenger comes and speaks to Job: "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

Observe: A great wind (a natural disaster) killed Job's children. Yet, because Job is aware that behind this mighty wind was God's sovereign hand, Job does not hesitate to say that it is God who has taken the lives of his children: "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away" (Job 1:21). From Job 1:6-12 we know that God allowed this calamity to test Job's faith, not to punish him for his sin. Therefore, a natural disaster is not necessarily a direct result of personal sin.

Yes, there are instances in the Bible where we can conclude with all certainty that a disaster occurred as a direct result of personal sin. For example, we know that God rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire out of heaven in order to punish the people of these cities (Gen. 19:24). Hence, this particular tragedy was undoubtedly a form of divine judgment. We know this truth because God tells us in his Word.

Now, how about Typhoon Yolanda? Was it also a form of divine retribution? Did God punish the Philippines with this typhoon? The answer is simply that we do not know, because God does not tell us in his Word. Furthermore, it is not our business to know. Jesus does not want us to speculate whether God punished the Philippines or not. We cannot always understand why God does what he does. His wisdom is infinite, whereas ours is finite. God says in Isaiah 55:8-9:

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

There is a song that says:

God is too wise to be mistaken
God is too good to be unkind
So when you don't understand
When you don't see His plan
When you can't trace His hand
Trust His heart

4. Jesus wants us to look at our own sin and not the sins of those affected by disasters.

The main message of Jesus in our text is repentance. Twice Jesus emphatically tells his audience, “I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (vv. 3 & 5). Notice how Jesus uses the two disasters in our passage to direct his listeners’ attention to the worst kind of death—everlasting death in the lake of fire. Jesus shifts the focus of the conversation from physical and temporal death to spiritual and eternal death. Therefore, for us believers in Christ, we must use the occasion of Typhoon Yolanda to talk to others, especially unbelievers, about eternity.

Dear reader, instead of discussing the sins of the victims of this typhoon, consider your own sins, for unless you repent of your own sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you, too, will perish. Again, instead of speculating whether God punished the Filipinos for their sins or not, focus on your own sins. Ask yourself, “Have I repented of my sins? Have I believed in the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?” If not, God’s condemnation will remain upon you (John 3:18).

5. Jesus wants us to realize that nothing distinguishes us from the victims of disasters but the grace of God.

By calling his listeners to repent, Jesus is telling them that they, too, are sinners, deserving of death. As Scripture says, “[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23) and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Jesus, therefore, makes it clear to his audience that the reason they are still alive is because of God’s grace. I remember attending a conference in British Columbia in 2009. One of the speakers was Jerry Bridges, who was 80 years old at that time. Bridges is known for his classic book—*The Pursuit of Holiness*. Bridges mentioned something that struck me. He said, “What differs us from others is nothing but the grace of God.”

As we think of the victims in the Philippines, remember that we could have been one of them. What happened to the Philippines could happen where you live. Thus, thank God for graciously sparing your life. That we are still alive should humble us before God and make us appreciate more his grace upon us.

In his famous hymn “Amazing Grace,” John Newton says,

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
‘tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

Concluding Challenge

Let me ask you with love:

1. Do you think that those who died in disasters were worse sinners than you are, or do you recognize your own sinnership?
2. Do you think that you are *racially* superior to those who suffered in disasters, or do you realize that with God there is no respect of persons?
3. Do you think that disasters are always indicators of God’s punishment?
4. Do you focus on looking at the sins of those affected by disasters, or do you seize the opportunity to examine yourself?
5. Do you realize that nothing distinguishes you from the victims of disasters but the grace of God?

Finally, remember this: The super typhoon that ravaged the Philippines is a reminder that we live in a fallen world—a world corrupted by sin (Rom. 8:19-22). A disaster, moral or natural, shows the problem that exists between our Creator and his creation. Indeed, there is a problem between the Creator and his creatures. The solution to this problem is Jesus Christ—the only mediator between God and us. This sinless Jesus is the one who suffered “the strongest storm” from the hand of God, so that we sinners might be reconciled to God through Christ by faith. Do you have Jesus Christ?