

OUR REACTIONS WHEN CALAMITY STRIKES

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The recent terrorism in New York and Washington, and the loss of work and possible loss of entitlements after the collapse of Ansett, as well as personal bereavements and disappointments should lead us to analyse both what our natural human reactions are, and what they ought to be.

As we watched film footage of the aircraft crashing into the towers of the World Trade Centre, we felt stunned disbelief. We had to remind ourselves that there was much more here than the loss of buildings. We felt compassion for the many victims. We felt fear, as we realised that we are all very vulnerable, and that human life is so fickle and swiftly cut off. We felt indignation at this premeditated and barbarous act on civilians. We felt anger, and feelings of outrage led to the thought that those who planned this surely ought to be punished. With respect to the past, we felt grief for the many lives lost or broken. With respect to the future, we felt grief for the many things that would never come to be.

We also acknowledged that there is a positive side even to such calamities. We admired heroism and self-sacrifice to protect or to rescue others and were grateful for them. Perhaps we perceived that, if we want to know what people are really like, we see the answer when we watch how they behave in a crisis. These are natural human thoughts and feelings. We have to add that we have to confess that our words are simply unable to do justice to such calamity, loss, and grief.

The Christian must go further and ask what his or her reactions ought to be. One is a realisation of the depth of human wickedness. Psalm 11:2 reads: "Fort-look! Wicked people draw their bows. They set their arrows against the bowstrings to shoot in the dark at people who are upright in heart." However, we must resist the temptation to blame only others. The first reaction ought to be repentance. Under the fear of God, we all need to confess our guilt, our weakness, laziness, indifference, and neglect of the important thing: God's grace in His Son. As we confess our own lack of fear, love, and trust in God, and idolatrous attachment to the things of this world, we have to add that we have all deserved far worse. Such calamities should be regarded as wake-up calls to individuals and to the church to reform and return to the Lord.

In larger perspective, such grief and distress are common to the human condition. Jeremiah mourned the destruction of his beloved city and the captivity of his people. We are no different as we are tempted to ask, "For what reason", and driven to ask, "For what purpose?" Jeremiah wrote, "My sick heart is a burden to me! Listen to the voice, the cry for help of the daughter of my people from a distant land: 'Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not there?'"

Such calamities should lead us to remember that evil is not something merely in human beings. It also comes from the Devil, who wants to destroy whatever is good in God's creation, and wants to destroy the souls of all human beings eternally in hell. Since the fall into sin, sin and death ruin this world. Present calamities are slight in comparison with the wrath of God that is coming.

It is a salutary thing to acknowledge our fragility and give full vent to grief. Jeremiah wrote: "Because of the crushing of the daughter of my people I have been crushed. I have been dressed in mourning attire; horror has been gripping me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no doctor there? Why, then, has the healing of the daughter of my people not progressed? I wish that my head were water, and that my eye were a fountain for tears, so that I might weep day and night for those of the daughter of my people who have been killed."

We need to resist the sinful temptation to blame God. Yes, He knows that such calamities are coming, and has the power to prevent them. No, that does not mean that He is cruel and unloving. We assert that the Lord's throne is in heaven. He sees. "The LORD is in His holy temple. The throne of the LORD is in heaven. His eyes see. The flashing glances of His eyes test the descendants of Adam" (Ps 11:4). However, He does not see with apathy and unconcern. We admit that the will of the hidden God is a mystery, and to our finite minds, He seems to act in riddles. Nevertheless, we know that He cares.

Not only does God care, but He is also still in control of His creation. Nothing escapes His government and His permission. He also is righteous, and though He seems to act slowly, nothing will escape His justice. "The LORD tests the righteous person, but His soul hates the wicked person and the one who loves violence... Fire, sulphur, and a whirlwind will be the portion of their cup. For the LORD is righteous. He loves righteous actions. His face perceives the upright person."

God is also loving and merciful. We have the assurance of His love in the atonement for sin that He has provided in His Son's live, death, and resurrection. Here we see God as He has revealed Himself, though behind the mask of the assumed humanity of His Son, and in His suffering with us, living under humility, rejection, and

suffering, even to death on the cross.

What His Son has done, in giving Himself up to redeem all sin, including the sins of the worst terrorists, should move us to trust. Believers need to remember that God uses the external aspects of evil, without being responsible for what makes them evil, in corrective ways for those whom He loves. So when the Lord disciplines His people, they should not despise it, but remember that He is acting in love, however unloving He may seem to be at the moment.

Such thoughts ought to move us to thanks to God for the really important things in our lives. They remind us of our blessings, and help us to distinguish the basic things from the peripheral things.

Above all, God has won for sinful people His surpassing gift of eternal life. That gives believers hope. God's gift of eternal life is beyond all hatred, calamity, loss, and sorrow. Our joy in the hope of the glory of God means that we know that, even if lives are lost, even if there is more misery and sorrow than before, misery and sorrow will end. The resurrection of Christ is the answer to the human problem of death.

When calamity strikes, we need to remember that there is victory through the love of God in Christ. Paul wrote, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ... Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who has loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor present circumstances nor future circumstances, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."