

*When Faith Is Shaken*  
*John 9:1-5*  
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<sup>1</sup>As [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

<sup>3</sup>"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. <sup>4</sup>As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Because God is sovereign—in control—these disciples assumed that being born blind is no accident. So they asked Jesus, "Whose fault is it, his or his parents?" (Though it doesn't say how an unborn person could be at fault!) It's like when Job's friends—confused as to why his wealth and family would be mysteriously taken from him—blurted out, "You must have done something to deserve it; search your heart and confess..." And Job insisted, "I didn't do anything to deserve this!"

Jesus agrees that God doesn't usually send suffering upon certain people. In Luke 13 Jesus declares that of the 18 persons who died when a tower fell, one wasn't necessarily anymore guilty than another. In the case of the man born blind, Jesus declared, "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned,*" said Jesus, "*but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.*" In other words, why this suffering happened is a mystery; but just you watch what God does with it!

The earthquake caused everyone to wonder **Why Haiti?** Pat Robertson speculated that hundreds of thousands of people died because 200 years ago, slaves preparing to revolt "made a pact with the devil." Actually, I've heard other Christians in Haiti also speculate that an ancient Voodoo ceremony is responsible for the slow pace of progress—the country just seems cursed. That's a terrible misrepresentation of God, who sent His Son to break the power of sin. It would be silly if it weren't so tragic; thinking they are cursed keeps some Haitians infatuated with Voodoo.

By the way, Christian fundamentalists aren't the only ones seeing that wickedness brought the earthquake. Richard Morse, a renowned Haitian-American musician, whose mother was a Voodoo priestess, claims that the destruction of the government buildings and all the Roman Catholic basilicas are God's judgment against the church and state's toleration of injustice and corruption... So there, it's the church's fault!

No, earthquakes are caused because the earth's crust continues to shift as the continents spread out across the core of the earth. The forces that caused that 7.0 magnitude earthquake had been building up six miles beneath the surface for thousands of years. That doesn't take God off the hook; He created an earthquake-prone planet. He is sovereign; nothing happens that God doesn't allow; in everything, God is working out His purpose. God doesn't stop people from building cities on earthquake-prone areas. God's not "off the hook" just because there's a natural explanation. We'll come back to the God question.

But first let's admit that Pat Robertson and the Voodoo musician are right about one thing—evil made this natural event a humanitarian disaster. David Brooks of the New York Times points out that in 1989 the same magnitude 7.0 earthquake in the heavily populated San Francisco region killed only 63 people. Remember, it happened just before a World Series game and that whole stadium "did the wave" without concrete dropping on anybody! The difference between 63 and 200,000 people dying is poverty—poorly

constructed buildings, many without “R-bar” in the concrete...bad infrastructure...terrible public services...non-existent police.

Yes, evil has had a hold on Haiti. Not because of some Voodoo curse but because of centuries of exploitation and insidious corruption. Time doesn’t allow us to recount the sad history of Haiti, until recently, outsiders have been parasites. After overthrowing their masters, the slave nation was forced by France to repurchase their freedom for 150 million Francs. Large landowners cut down the forests to pay off these debts and grow sugar-cane. For most of the twentieth century, the United States policy was to give unrestrained support to brutal dictators, “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc” Duvalier; they literally ran Haiti like mafia bosses, taking a percentage of every bag of sugar. Unlike China, where factory jobs lift people out of poverty, in Haiti the jobs provided by foreign-owned companies were too scarce and low-paying to change the equation. The democracy that began 19 years ago has until recently made things worse—instability, military coups, and continued corruption, drives manufacturing jobs out of the country. Only now does Haiti have a decent president. But there’s 200 years of raping the land and the people to undo. And so the desperate masses like army ants have stripped the land of trees to make charcoal and netted the ocean’s fish. Voodoo is part of the evil; superstition not only dishonors God, it keeps people in ignorance.

Yes, evil has a hold on Haiti, so a 7.0 magnitude earthquake yields incredible suffering for everyone, including devout Haitian Christians and missionaries. And we do wonder **why a loving God would** allow such suffering. Such questions aren’t new; you resolve them and you see someone else struggling with a really hard life, or hear about another person dying from disease or an accident. For Jews and Christians, God’s never fully off the hook. The other religions have simple answers. Hinduism holds to the cycle of Karma—suffering is a sign of wickedness in a previous life. Buddhism says that suffering is an illusion. Islam says suffering is the will of Allah...get over it. Jews and Christians aren’t supposed to cling to such simplistic answers. The closest the Bible ever comes to giving an explanation for suffering is the admission that God’s decision to create people free to reject Him allows for disastrous consequences. Yet we still wonder. Even our scriptures openly question whether God cares, especially the Psalms. In chapter 10 of his story, Job declares:

<sup>1</sup> *"I loathe my very life;  
therefore I will give free rein to my complaint  
and speak out in the bitterness of my soul.*

<sup>2</sup> *I will say to God: Do not condemn me,  
but tell me what charges you have against me.*

<sup>3</sup> *Does it please you to oppress me,  
to spurn the work of your hands,  
while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?*

<sup>4</sup> *Do you have eyes of flesh?  
Do you see as a mortal sees?*

Friends, God replied to Job’s complaint...the world’s complaint...taking “eyes of flesh.” Unlike Bette Midler’s beautiful song, God does *not* “watch from a distance.” God came close. God entered human existence. He has seen and felt human suffering, even knowing the pain of a torturous death. So while it’s only natural for Christians to echo Job’s question, “Why?” eventually we remember that Christianity is **not about why, but what!**

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the message of **what God has done** about evil. Jesus dealt evil a mortal blow through his non-violent death on the cross. Instead of killing sinful people, Jesus demonstrated the power of suffering love, the greatest force in the universe. Then God the Father raised Jesus the Son from the dead, opening heaven's door to those who welcome His grace.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the message of **what God is doing** now. Those who welcome God's gift of life become leaders in the work of restoring God's justice to earth. We share Jesus with others, so that God will turn their hearts away from evil and towards His love. And whenever we can, we make God's reign visible on earth. We join others in the fight against ignorance, exploitation, and bad government. We give hand-outs and hand-ups. In Haiti we feed hundreds of children who are trying to get an education. We also build churches and support a re-forestation effort that has improved the lives of 18,000 Haitian farmers. And we rejoice when God works through other kinds of people. Yesterday we got an encouraging email from Jay Threadgill, our Pentecostal partner in Port-au-Prince. Though members are buried in the rubble of the big church, he celebrates God's provision, especially how God is using the Fishers of Men network to give out 10,000 meals a day from relief agencies. Jay tells of a church in Texas sending a huge tent. And then he writes,

Here is a good one. We're receiving food from the Arab Emirates, with Moslems on my property and doing daily prayers. I used yesterday Mormon Doctors, We have Jewish doctors coming, I've contacted the Catholics to help them with food, and they're all working with a bunch of Holy Ghost Christians. Only God could bring those walls down. Kind of funny if you ask me!

I wonder if Jay recognized the irony of saying "only God could bring those walls down"? Maybe that's His way of saying, "I'll never understand why this happened...my life's work has been thwarted...but I can already see God's hand at work."

And we who trust in Jesus place our greatest hopes in **what God will do**. Not only is God working through human progress, God has overcome the limits of progress, by raising Jesus Christ from the dead. That awful moment of death can be the great moment of victory, when those entombed discover that they are not abandoned, they are not forgotten, that the One who made them remembers them, and in the flash of an instant re-creates them...fully human, but without flaw, without limits...out of stuff of eternity...to a new kind of earth where justice reigns, as Revelation 21 says:

*Now the dwelling of God is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup>He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*

Friends, I get mad when Christians misrepresent God because I think that many who reject the Christian God are rejecting a distortion. I actually believe that moments like these are opportunities to clarify our message. That's what Jesus meant back in John 9 when he said,

*<sup>3</sup>"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. <sup>4</sup>As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."*

These things are the opportunity to let *the work of God be displayed in our lives. As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sends us* into the world he loves, for he is the light of the world.

The weird thing is that while these natural disasters give people reasons to stop believing in a good God, the human response also cuts into the atheists' argument that is no God, no good, and no reasonable explanation other than humans are complicated collection of chemicals—we are simply alone in this struggle to survive as the fittest. While that dismal conclusion is tempting, in the long run the Good News prevails!

My seminary theology class was team-taught by two professors. One of them said in Job-like candor, "For me, suffering is the biggest reason not to be a Christian." Many of us can relate. But the other, Professor Ben Kline used to say, "For me, the reality of suffering is the biggest reason to be a Christian. Christianity's claim of what God has done, what He's doing now, and what He will do is the only thing that makes sense out of this senselessness."

Brothers and sisters, the spectacle of Haiti's suffering has shaken our faith. Yet our faith endures. Like an earthquake-proof building, it's not brittle; it bends without breaking...it stands when every other hope crumbles.

And so let's tell of what God has done...

...let's throw off every hindrance and join what God's doing...

...and let's live in expectation of what God will do!