

bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it" (*Isaiah 46:10,11*). God is absolutely sovereign over all that happens, and nothing happens apart from His watchful eye or His perfect will. That is not to say that God creates evil. The Bible says He does not, nor does He do evil, nor does He tempt anyone to do evil. But evil exists. It's everywhere. And God will ultimately overrule evil for His own glory. Scripture promises that God will one day eliminate evil and evildoers from the universe forever.

In the meantime, we are not to think that evil frustrates His plan, catches Him off guard, or nullifies His absolute sovereignty in any way. "The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand" (*Isaiah 14:24*). In fact, God is able to use even the evil that men do to accomplish His purpose. "Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee: the remainder of wrath shalt Thou restrain" (*Psalms 76:10*). He is always in absolute control of all things, even when it appears from a human perspective that things have gone completely out of control. God is still in charge, and His precise will is being accomplished – even in the midst of calamity and chaos.

"Shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?" (*Amos 3:6*). In other words, disaster does not occur – even atrocities that are caused by wicked people for ungodly purposes – unless the Lord has a purpose in it. We may not see immediately what His purpose is. But we can know with absolute certainty that His purposes are always good, and righteous, and for the ultimate benefit of His people and the honor of His holy Name.

We should not assume, moreover, that it always signifies divine judgment when disaster falls upon a people. It is utter folly to imagine that we can immediately understand the full meaning of every act of God's providence, or to declare recklessly that a particular tragedy is divine punishment or proof of God's displeasure against the victims.

We see this clearly in the Old Testament account of Job. The series of tragedies that happened to him reflected *Satan's* animosity to him, not God's. Scripture says Job was "blameless and upright, one that feared God and shunned evil" (*Job 1:1,8*). But Satan despised Job, claiming that Job served God only because God blessed him (*vv 9-11*). So God gave Satan permission to afflict Job: "And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand" (*v 12*). God

would illustrate through Job the perseverance of saving faith, and the futility of Satan's attempts to destroy the salvation of those who belong to God.

The evil that subsequently occurred to Job was all from Satan; and yet God was still sovereignly exercising complete control. He strictly drew the limits on what He would permit Satan to do. Later (*Job 2:4-6*), He removed part of that restriction, allowing Satan to afflict Job's person, but prohibiting him from taking Job's life. Even then, God remained in control, and Satan could do no more to Job than what God's sovereign hand allowed him to do.

This was not a cruel game. God had a good purpose in allowing Satan to afflict Job. The experience was even good for Job in the ultimate sense. God used it to deepen Job's faith, to perfect his understanding of God, to enrich his appreciation of the divine majesty, to show him the insignificance of earthly things, to refine his character, and above all, to show the enduring steadfastness of genuine saving faith. Those were weighty and important lessons, infinitely more valuable to Job in the scope of eternity than all the earthly privileges and possessions Satan had taken from him. And in the end, God gave back to Job much more in the way of earthly blessings than Satan had ever taken away from him.

Job's counselors were convinced the calamities were irrefutable evidence of God's displeasure over some secret sin Job was harboring. They asked, "Who ever perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off?" (*4:7*). But the perspective of Job's counselors was short-sighted. Affliction is not always proof of divine displeasure, just as prosperity is not necessarily proof of God's blessing. God makes the sun rise on the good as well as the evil, and He sends rain on the just and the unjust alike (*Matt 5:45*). Calamity and misfortune aren't always punishments for sin.

Nonetheless, it is true that calamity is a natural and inevitable *consequence* of sin. And that is the real reason this world is filled with tragedy and misfortune. We are all sinners who have rebelled against God and violated His commands (*Rom 3:23*); and "the wages of sin is death" (*Rom 6:23*). That's why disaster and death are universal in human experience. "It is appointed unto men once to die" (*Heb 9:27*). We don't *deserve* comfort and blessing and divine favor. We deserve death for our sin. Every one of us is a willing participant in evil, and calamity is the inevitable result.

So the question we ought to ask is not why disasters sometimes happen. What we *ought* to ask is why

disaster doesn't happen all the time! This is the real marvel. It ought to amaze us that God, who owes us nothing but judgment for our sin, ordinarily chooses to bless us, bestow upon us His lovingkindness, and blanket us with His mercy. *That* ought to keep us in constant astonishment and wonder. And it ought to keep us on our knees before Him with grateful hearts. It *is* an enormous tragedy that so many people died in the terrorist attacks. I don't want to minimize it or trivialize it in any way. But the truth is that nothing happened to them that wasn't going to happen anyway. They were all going to die. Death is an inevitable fact of life for which each of us must be prepared.

Every day in America, thousands of people die. About fifty thousand Americans die each week. Tens of millions die each year worldwide. Sadly, death is inevitable. Eventually everyone will die. We are more comfortable when people die one by one. It makes the fact of death easier to ignore. Every now and then, hundreds will die at once in a plane crash, or thousands will perish in a flood, an earthquake, an epidemic, or some other kind of disaster. Fortunately, such disasters are rare.

But everyone *does* die eventually. That is reality. We try not to think about it. We go on blissfully living our lives with little regard for the fact that thousands are dying each week. Yet death is all around us. The 3,000 people that lost their lives in the terrorist strikes is less than half of the average number of people who die on any typical day in America. I cite that statistic not to trivialize the horrific scope of the September 11 disaster, but to put in perspective the enormous reality that death is the universal consequence of human sin. We cannot keep death at a distance, as much as we would like to. Death is a plague on the whole human race.

Of course, one element that adds to the tragedy of the disaster is that so many people died who were not expecting to die. Death came to them abruptly. But that happens every day, too. It could happen to any one of us at any time. We need to be prepared for the eventuality. As sinners worthy of death, we have no guarantee of life and no right to insist that God should grant us long lives. Our times are in His hand (*Psalms 31:15*). Life itself is brief and fragile. We cannot count on life. *Death* we can count on!

This is a constant theme in Scripture. The Psalmist said, "Behold, Thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before Thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity" (*Psalms*

39:5). "Thou art God. Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men... Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth" (*Psalms 90:2-6*).

Other passages setting forth the brevity of life – "All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the Spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass" (*Isaiah 40:6,7*). "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not" (*Job 14:1,2*). "Ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that" (*James 4:14,15*).

God is sovereign over human life. And why not? He is the giver of life, and He has every right to establish its boundaries. "It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture" (*Psalms 100:3*).

The appropriate question is not, "Why did God allow so many people to be killed?" The real question is why He allows any of us to live at all! God is amazingly merciful to this fallen, sinful race. He shields us to a very large degree from the awful effects of our sin. We live under constant mercy, and when the ugly effects of evil are clearly shown to us, we should not be shocked.

We have grown so accustomed to grace that we don't understand the full effects of our own sin. But every once in a while, God draws back the curtain and allows us to see what evil looks like in all of its horror, so that we can appreciate His justice when He punishes sin. We must never be resentful or think God is the one at fault when the consequences of evil are manifest. After all, we have all been willing participants in the evil, and *that* is what causes calamity to occur. The fault lies with us, not with God. The fact of His absolute sovereignty does not change that.

Jeremiah also points these things out – that God is utterly sovereign, and we are utterly sinful. He tells us that it is never appropriate for us to complain when divine providence brings calamity our way. "Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the LORD has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the

WHERE WAS GOD ON SEPTEMBER 11?



The images of September 11, 2001, are imbedded deeply in our minds. The surprise attacks on the World Trade Center twin towers and the Pentagon, causing catastrophic death and devastation, will never be forgotten.

Following these terrorists attacks, it seemed as if almost everyone began thinking and talking about God. The atrocity was of such monumental proportions that people naturally wondered what spiritual significance it had. Evil forces were obviously at work to cause the atrocity. Why did God permit it? Surely He could have stopped a few madmen bent on suicide from destroying thousands of innocent people. Why would He allow such a horrific thing to happen? For that matter, Why does God permit evil at all? Is He angry with the human race? Or are the powers of evil so strong that even God is helpless against them?

These are important questions that we all must face at one time or another. And the Bible has the answers. We have not been left to wonder hopelessly in the dark, or to guess as to why these things happen. God's Word gives us clear answers to these questions.

The Bible tells us that God is *absolutely sovereign* – that everything that occurs happens within the framework of His purpose. God “worketh *all things* after the counsel of His own will” (*Eph 1:11*). Indeed, if God were not sovereign over all things, how could we trust His promise – “*All things* work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose” (*Rom 8:28*)? John Piper has written,

This “all things” includes the fall of sparrows (*Matt 10:29*), the rolling of dice (*Prov 16:33*), the slaughter of His people (*Psalms 44:11*), the decisions of kings (*Prov 21:1*), the failing of sight (*Exod 4:11*), the sickness of children (*2 Sam 12:15*), the loss and gain of money (*1 Sam 2:7*), the suffering of saints (*1 Peter 4:19*), the completion of travel plans (*James 4:15*), the persecution of Christians (*Heb 12:4-7*), the repentance of souls (*2 Tim 2:25*), the gift of faith (*Phil 1:29*), the pursuit of holiness (*Phil 3:12,13*), the growth of believers (*Heb 6:3*), the giving of life and the taking in death (*1 Sam 2:6*), and the crucifixion of His Son (*Acts 4:27,28*).

God Himself says, “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure...yea, I have spoken it, I will also

Most High that both good and ill go forth? Why should any living mortal, or any man, offer complaint in view of his sins?” (*Lam 3:37-39 NASB*).

The New Testament describes an occasion that has an eerie similarity to the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. Two awful catastrophes resulted in tragic loses of life in Jerusalem during the time when Jesus ministered there. One was a terrorist atrocity of sorts. Pilate, the Roman governor in Israel, ordered his men to invade the Temple and slay some Galilean worshipers, people from the same part of the country from which Jesus came. The episode demonstrated Pilate's brutality in a shockingly graphic way. Scripture says he mingled their blood with their sacrifices. In the other incident, a tower in Siloam (near to the Temple mount in Jerusalem) had accidentally collapsed, suddenly killing eighteen people.

Luke 13 describes how some people came and asked Jesus to explain the disasters. Surely, they believed, these tragedies must have some spiritual significance. Perhaps those who died were uniquely deserving of divine judgment. Christ corrected that misconception: “Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (*Luke 13:2-5*).

The question troubling people's minds was this: Those people who died in the Temple were religious. They were doing what God had told them to do. They were worshipers. Why would God allow idolatrous Roman soldiers to go in there and kill them in such a violent fashion, so that their own blood was mingled with their sacrifice? And why did God permit the tower to collapse and crush people who were merely going about the business of their everyday lives?

Some were wondering if the people who died were secretly worse sinners than anyone else. Jesus answered that concern bluntly, twice repeating the same thing: “*I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish*” (*vv 3,5*).

This, Jesus said, was the main lesson people should draw from the terrorist incident and the tower collapse: Everyone dies. When they die suddenly, it doesn't mean they were worse than anyone else. Neither the people who were murdered purposely in the

Temple, nor the people who died accidentally under the collapse of that tower, were any *more* deserving of calamity than other people. They were not necessarily any worse sinners than the rest of us. We all deserve nothing but calamity and destruction, and if we don't repent and turn to God for mercy, ultimate calamity – worse than any earthly horror – *will* be what we experience in eternity. We will perish in hell!

Jesus' warning had a particular application to the people of Jerusalem in His day. Their whole society was on the verge of sudden destruction by Rome – in a massive catastrophe that actually occurred less than forty years later (*A.D. 70*). The whole city and the Temple were utterly sacked and destroyed. The loss of life was enormous. By most estimates nearly eighty thousand Jewish people perished. It was one of the most crushing military defeats the world has ever seen. Christ's words were a loving appeal for those people to repent and embrace Him as their Messiah before it was too late. It was their only hope of eternal deliverance from the evil that was coming to take their lives.

His answer to their question has an application today as well. Everyone without exception is facing inevitable death. Those who do not repent and embrace Christ as Lord and Savior will perish eternally without hope. His words stand as both a stern warning and a compassionate appeal to every person.

Death could come as quickly and as unpredictably to every one of us as it came to those eighteen people who were suddenly killed in Siloam by the tower that fell. The terrorists attacks in America graphically remind us of this. “I tell you, Nay: [those people weren't any worse sinners than the rest of us] but, *except ye repent*, ye shall all likewise perish.”

Of the people who died in the Pentagon, the people killed in the World Trade Center towers, and the people who perished in the airplanes that were hijacked, we know that some were believers in Jesus Christ, but others were not. Death came without warning to all of them. And those who perished without Christ perished without any hope. They were not necessarily worse sinners than anyone else. But Christ's warning is clear: *All* who do not repent will perish without hope.

Christ tells us that this is the chief lesson to be drawn from calamities like this. They are reminders to us that we must prepare for death, which is inevitable and could come at any time. We are all sinners. Death and judgment are certain. We don't deserve

anything but death and judgment. But as long as God graciously blesses us with the gift of life, we have the opportunity to repent and receive His full forgiveness.

Immediately after issuing those calls for repentance, Jesus went on to give a parable: “A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down” (*Luke 13:6-9*).

The parable makes the point vividly. We are all living on borrowed time. God could say at any time, “Cut it down.” But in His grace, He waits. “Just give it a little more time to see if it bears the fruit of repentance.” That's the heart of God. He calls us to repent of our sin and embrace the gift of His forgiveness. And for those who have spiritual ears to hear and hearts to respond, in Christ is full and free salvation, and eternal life forever in heaven.

At least two and a half million Americans will die this year. Eventually, *all* of us will die. It's time for people to take life and death more seriously. Enough of our games. Enough of our obsession with material things, nonstop entertainment, and this world's pleasures. *Now* is the time to contemplate life and death, heaven and hell, time and eternity with the utmost soberness and solemnity. There's nothing in life more important. We're living on borrowed time. It's time to repent, call upon God, and look to Jesus Christ to save us from sudden and eternal destruction.

In the church, it's time for preachers to stop the theatrics, the trivial entertainment, and the sermons about self-esteem and pop psychology. It's time to speak of life and death matters in biblical terms. We're called upon to rescue the perishing and care for the dying – and that's serious business. It's time for Christians to make their lives count as a witness for the gospel. It's time to be serious about eternal things. What else really matters? □

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by John MacArthur