

Earthquakes: Signs of the Times

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Feeling our bed shake in the middle of the night during an earthquake in Bacolod City, Negros Occidental, the Philippines, was a scary and unusual experience for us. We jumped out of bed and rushed upstairs to get our children to the downstairs living room in case of an aftershock. In the light of day, it turned out to be a minor earth tremor which had caused minor damage. Earthquakes have been with us since the beginning of recorded history. Some had devastating effects. On All Saints' Day, November 1, 1755, Lisbon, Portugal, experienced three great shock waves, which demolished all the houses in the lower city in rapid succession. At noon, as a cloud of dust covered the ruined city, the last shock was felt. The Royal Palace, the recently completed Opera House and the magnificent cathedral, which, although damaged, had survived the earthquake, were consumed by fire. Sixty thousand people perished in that terrible disaster. Voltaire, the embodiment of French 18th century Enlightenment, asked, "Why could it not have burst forth in the midst of an uninhabited desert? Why is Lisbon engulfed while Paris, no less wicked, dances?"

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, human societies began to consider earthquakes as natural phenomenon rather than God's retribution of sin etc. For millions of people God no longer exists. Many point to evolutionary theories and insights gained by scientific research to show that the world exists on its own. They think of the Bible as a myth, a projection of religious symbolism and mythology. In *Why the Earth Quakes. The Story of Earthquakes and Volcanoes*, Matthys Levy and Mario Salvadori argue, "For the first time in human history the causes of these devastating physical phenomena, only a few centuries ago considered to be 'the acts of God', are now understood and it is up to us to avoid their worst consequences." If earthquakes are no more than natural phenomena, endless meaningless disasters, scenes of a world without God, where then is hope? But from the Biblical perspective, earthquakes have meaning.

The Earth is the Lord's

The attitude of modern Western people to nature is vastly different from the outlook of the Bible. When we look at the stars, we think in terms of light-years and the possibility of interplanetary travel, but for the Biblical writer the night sky was a breath-taking display of the wisdom, power and glory of the Creator (Job 38:31-33; Ps. 19:1-4; Isa. 40:25-26). We experience the cycles of days and seasons in terms of schedules of work and holidays, whereas the Israelites saw in them a sign of the covenant faithfulness of God (Gen. 1:14-19). The courses of the stars, the circuits of the winds, and the meandering of the streams, were all ascribed to the activity of God (Job 38:24; Ps.104:10; Jer.10:13). In Scripture, the regularities of nature bear witness to the providential love and power of God. Unlike modern science and technology, therefore, based on the premise that the same causes under the same conditions always produce the same effects, the Biblical writers believed that the outcome of all events depended on the will of God. In very many places in Scripture, great convulsions of nature are spoken of in connection with special manifestations of God. Through sudden changes in the course of nature, He delivered His people from their enemies and brought judgment on the wicked. The burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, and the dramatic change of the course of the sun at

Gibeon are well-known God-directed events.

The Role of Earthquakes in Scripture

In Scripture, earthquakes have a prominent role. The whole of Mount Sinai "trembled violently" when God gave the Law (Ex. 19:18). God punished disobedient Korah. The ground "split apart, opened its mouth and swallowed" Korah and his companions (Nu. 16:32). In the days of King Saul, God sent an earthquake to deliver the Israelites from the Philistine army (1 Sam. 4:15). A terrible earthquake took place in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah, which the Jewish historian, Josephus (*Antiq.* X,4) says it shook the ground. And a rent was made in the Temple, so that the rays of the sun shone through it, which, falling upon the king's face, struck him with leprosy. This was a punishment which the historian ascribes to the wrath of God as consequence of Uzziah's usurpation of the priest's office. That this earthquake was of an awful character may be learned from the fact that Zachariah (14:5) refers to it. It also appears from the prophet Amos' words "two years before the earthquake" (1:1) that the event was extremely traumatic. It left such deep impressions on men's minds, that it became a sort of epoch from which to set dates. In the reign of Herod (Sept. 2. 31 B.C.), an earthquake occurred in Judea, "such as had not happened at any other time", destructive to men and animals (*Antiq.* xv.v.2).

The Fall

People often struggle with questions about why there are natural calamities such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, and other disasters which cause great suffering. Although the Bible does not explain these things in detail, it does state that the whole natural creation has been severely disrupted because of the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. Sin brought corruption to all of life, material and immaterial. The very characteristics of the physical world have been altered radically by the Fall. God said, "Cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen. 3:17). Who cursed the ground? God did. The earth has been desecrated by its inhabitants. It is the victim of our transgressions (Hosea 4:1-3). God announced that the earth would be changed to produce painful things like thorns and thistles (Gen 3:18). And surely this must include other painful things as well, such as the sting of scorpions and poisonous snakes, which Jesus identified with Satan's activity (Luke 10:19). The broader cosmic aspects of the Fall are worked out in Romans 8:18-23. Not only humans, but all nature is subject to the law of threat and anxiety and death. Their rebellion against God has a universal dimension. The Flood in the time of Noah is an example. By God's word the earth and the water were formed. "By water also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed" (2 Pet. 3:5-6).

Judgment

At our own peril, we may not dismiss an earthquake as just another geological occurrence. Each earthquake points to the final judgment. Between the ascension and our Lord's second coming, the Lamb of God reveals His wrath. He shakes the mountains and makes the earth tremble. He gives warning signals. The King and Judge of all the earth declares, "I am coming, prepare to meet Me." The church father Lactantius (c.250-325) warned, "Stars will fall in great numbers, so that all the heavens will appear dark without lights. The loftiest

mountains will also fall and be levelled with the plains. The sea will be rendered unnavigable. And that nothing may be lacking to evils of men and the earth, the trumpet will be heard from heaven.... And then everyone will tremble and quake at that mournful sound." In other words, God lets us know that no one can sin against Him and get away with it. It will be pay day some day.

But is each earthquake a judgment of God because of a specific sin? Is a community, which is buried under a landslide, more sinful than a neighbouring community that is spared from disaster? Jesus had something to say about those moments when nature seemingly lashes out at random. He referred to a tower which collapsed, killing eighteen people (Luke 13:4). Whether it fell because of an earthquake or a strong wind or the natural processes of decay is irrelevant. The crucial fact is that eighteen bystanders, minding their own business, were crushed to death in an instant. Jesus' question went to the heart of the issue: Were these eighteen people more wicked than anyone else in Jerusalem? His answer was, "No." The real lesson of the fallen tower was not that natural disasters help us to find the worst sinners, but that the fallen world does not offer guarantees. Any of us can be snuffed out at any moment by a wide variety of means.

Redemption

An earthquake does not only point to judgment, but also to redemption. An earthquake accompanied both the death and resurrection of Jesus (Matt. 27:51; 28:2). In obedience to His Father's will Jesus went to the cross. At the moment of Jesus' death God caused the earth to quake, the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened. The earthquake shows that His death had and is having significance for the entire universe. It foreshadows the restoration of the earth, divine harmony and order. There is going to be a new heaven and a new earth (Rev.21:1). It would not have been possible apart from our Lord's atoning death.

The earthquake at the resurrection of Christ was a miraculous shaking of the ground in the particular place where the tomb was located. The reason for it was the descent from heaven of God's special messenger, an angel. He stepped forward and must have taken the stone completely out of its groove and turned it over on its side. The result? The heavy stone was lying flat on the ground and the angel was sitting on it, to symbolize Christ's triumph (Matt. 28:2). As Dr. William Hendriksen put it, "By means of the resurrection of Christ from the grave, and the mighty earthquake that appropriately accompanied it, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ not only laughed in the faces of the plotters who had requested this guard, he also smiled benignly upon all his dear children, for what he was actually saying was this: 'I have accepted my Son's sacrifice as a complete ransom for all the sin of all who take refuge in him' (Rom.4 :25). And God used for His redemptive purpose an earthquake in Philippi. The manifestation of His power brought about the release from prison of Paul and Silas (Act 16:26ff).

Signs of the Times

Biblical prophecies reveal that earthquakes point to future calamitous events. When the disciples asked: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (Matt.24:3), Jesus replied with an apocalyptic depiction of the end-time. He spoke of cosmic

disasters, the sun and moon ceasing to shine, the stars falling from heaven, and powers of heaven being shaken. Jesus plainly stated that "famines, and pestilences, and *earthquakes*," are to characterize more and more the coming of the end (Matt.24:7-9). These prophecies go against the grain of the self-satisfied, secular, culture-optimists who expect the improvement of the human race to come via science and technology. They contradict the philosophy of progress in which the positive elements in humans and nature will gradually overcome evil. But good and evil, persecutions, calamities, revolutions, epidemics, and earthquakes will be with us until the cup of God's wrath is full, culminating in the day of judgment.

Thousands of Christians interpret the disturbances of our time as the predicted signs of Christ's early return. And aren't we all prone to predict, fix, know and predetermine the future, which is by definition unknowable and undeterminable? But no one knows the future. God keeps the time of Christ's return secret. Not only does God foresee the future, but He plans it and actually brings it to pass (Isa. 24:27-29). He has complete knowledge and control of events, both past and the future. Thus with regards to the end-time, Jesus said, "about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). The time and seasons are fixed by authority of the Father alone (Acts 1:7; 7:26). It is futile and sinful to predict the date of Jesus' return. Curiosity is wonderful. But for impertinence there is no excuse. Setting a date is trying to know more than the angels in heaven. The signs of the times mark the beginnings, but not the end. They are stepping stones to a final goal. God's plan is being carried forward. While we wait for our Lord's coming, people will eat and drink and marry and be given in marriage as they did in the days of Noah when he went into the ark (Matt.24:38).

Groen Van Prinsterer (1801-1876), a devout Christian Dutch statesman, historian, philosopher, was convinced that Christ's coming was near. As a student of the book of Revelation, he saw the fulfilment of prophetic signs. He said that we know what our Lord has foretold, the increase of wickedness, departure from the faith, anti-Christ powers at work and persecution of Christians. But Groen refrained from setting a date. He wrote that in the midst of our predictions and speculations, we should not forget that our Lord will come whenever it pleases Him.

While we watch the signs of the times, we continue to hope. The signs are reasons for joyful anticipation. It does not make the present moment of life less important but it takes away the fear of sinking into nothingness from both our own end and that of the world. Amid the gathering darkness of our dangerous times, we continue on in the glowing optimism born of faith in the truth of the infallible Scriptures. What God has promised, He will do. His work will be finished. In Christ the creation will be restored and perfected.

The signs of earthquakes are not in themselves announcements that the end has arrived. Rather, they are warnings that action must be taken because God is concluding his dealings with the present world. The warnings will increase as the last hour draws nearer. Jesus described them as "the beginning of birth pains" (Matt. 24:80). They are signals that greater pain is to come and that something must be done before it is too late to act. As the church father, Cyprian declared, "Since now the end of the world is at hand, turn your minds to God, in the fear of God."

The Now and the Not Yet

How should we live as we watch the signs of the time and look forward to the Lord's return? Do we withdraw from the world and take shelter in the safe environment of the community of saints? The answer is, "No". To wait in the Biblical sense is not just to sit around. It is an active vigilance. The early Christians, with their gaze confidently set on the fulfillment of God's promises went into the world to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom. The waiting and watching which the nearness of the last day demands is not waiting in panic and fear. It does not involve a suppressing of the coming end of history which leads to false security of eating and drinking, of marrying and giving in marriage. It does not cause us to hide, but it makes us lift up our heads because our redemption is near and the Son of Man is coming in great power and glory (Luke 21:26ff.). As we stand before the imminent end of this age, we cannot fit ourselves in this world. Yet we must be active in it, seeking to improve it. Therefore, we must proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom. Roger S. Greenway notes that this Gospel calls "for the transformation of the heart and all of life. It governs how we live as individuals, families, and communities. It teaches us to show mercy to the poor, defend the oppressed, and seek reconciliation between hostile sides."

And let us not forget the role of the Church. She is the hope of the world and is positioned like no other channel of influence to shape culture. Her people are called to be in the world. As John Stott puts in *Basic Christianity*, "We find ourselves citizens of two kingdoms, the one earthly and the one heavenly. And each citizenship lays upon us duties which we are not at liberty to evade." Of course, utopia will not be achieved here on earth. We can only attempt to make the world a little more just and prosperous and free. We can try to replace dictatorships by slightly fewer bad democracies. As the German theologian, Helmut Thielicke, argued: "Where enthusiastic impatience is held in check by watchful soberness (1 Thess. 5:6; 1 Pet. 5:5) this activity will always take the form of an encouragement to take small steps. The modesty of small steps is possible because there is no illusion that we ourselves can bring God's kingdom but there is the assurance that it will come."

Conclusion

A Biblical view of the sign of the times shows that life is not ruled by fate. The Lord is still on the throne. We live with hope. Death has already been swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:55,57). Therefore, we cannot and may not surrender to the threats from Islamists or wherever else they may come from. Life is not meaningless. What we do for the Lord is not futile. When He comes, everything will be made new. Jesus said, "Behold, I coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book" (Rev. 22:7).