

How to Interpret Tragedy

We are hearing a lot of opinions and thoughts about this pestilence and plague that has come into the world. Some are wondering if life as we know it will ever return. Some are attributing this plague to God, calling it a judgment, while others see it as just another challenge that we can overcome.

I thought I would take some time to address some of these things, helping us to better understand God and how He works in the world. How should we see this pandemic or pestilence that is growing and threatens to destroy thousands and maybe even millions.

We all are or should be aware that not everything that happens can be interpreted as coming from God as a judgment. There was a flood that was a judgment in the times of Noah, but there are been many floods since that may or may not have been.

There are three important passages we must reflect upon before we can think or talk intelligently about this subject.

“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”...9 That which has been is what will be, That which is done is what will be done, And there is nothing new under the sun.13 And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. 14 I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind. 15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, & what is lacking cannot be numbered. Eccl. 1:2, 9,13-15; 7:13-14

What do we learn from these Scriptures? First, “*all is vanity and chasing the wind.*” Whether God is judging the world or not, it’s natural order leads to futility and frustration. Second, since “*what has been is what will be*” These things have happened before and will happen again. They are just a natural part of life under the sun after the curse. Third, after the curse, God has made things both crooked and lacking. Sickness, death and loss of dominion all came “after” Adam sinned. Now it is possible for Malaria and Denge fever to infect hundreds of millions each year. The flu, heart disease, diabetes, traffic accidents, all became possible and kill millions each year.

Consider the work of God; For who can make straight what He has made crooked? 14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, But in the day of adversity consider: Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, So that man can find out nothing that will come after him. Eccl. 7:13-14

I returned and saw under the sun that — The race is not to the swift, Nor the battle to the strong, Nor bread to the wise, Nor riches to men of understanding, Nor favor to men of skill; But time and chance happen to them all. Eccl. 9:11

Adversity and prosperity come to all, because of “*time and chance.*” In the new “*natural order,*” which is not natural at all, but came due to the curse of sin, righteousness and wickedness do not always factor into what is happening in the lives of individuals. The Holy Spirit has clearly revealed that “*just men perish in righteousness*” and “*wicked men prolong their lives in wickedness.*” Not only that, but there are just men to whom it happens what should occur to the wicked and wicked men who receive what the righteous should receive. There is no stronger or persuasive proof than this. God is certainly not directly behind such things. Only “*time and chance*” can explain it.

I have seen everything in my days of vanity: There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, And there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness. Eccl. 7:15

There is a vanity which occurs on earth, that there are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. Eccl. 8:14

Finally, to complete this point, He plainly states that everything comes alike to all. Whether we are righteous or wicked, clean or unclean, worshiping or not worshiping, good or a sinner, the same things happen to all.

All things come alike to all: One event happens to the righteous and the wicked; To the good, the clean, and the unclean; To him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner; He who takes an oath as he who fears an oath. 3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Eccl. 9:2-3

With all this in mind, we can now look scripturally and through the eyes of wisdom at what happens in the world. Having seen that most of the things that are here in the world are indiscriminate, coming alike to all, we have to be very careful. Dying in a country with malaria does not infer that it is a judgment from God. Getting hurt in a car crash or other accident cannot be used to prove that God is involved directly.

But God can and does use these things in His providence. If he finds a man or woman anywhere on earth that has a good and honest heart, He can use any of these things to chasten and mold that person. Many of the things that happen to the righteous are God’s chastening as an opportunity to grow and develop.

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? 8 But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. ... 11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Heb 12:7-9

Whether any of these things come directly from God or are just time and chance James urges us to use them to grow.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. Jas. 1:2-4

When it comes to nations, we are confronted with the same issues. Sometimes it can be time and chance and other times it is a judgment from God, but once again, either way, there are certain things that should be learned and certain actions that should be taken. It is whether or not a nation takes warning from these things that will determine what God will do next.

God sent the flood as a judgment to the ancient world, a volcanic eruption as a judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, then 10 plagues sent as a judgment against Egypt, and Israel to destroy in war, the seven nations of Canaan. God also explained to His people His method of dealing with nations.

And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, 27 so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; Acts 17:26-27

God determined when they would begin and end (*pre-appointed times*). He also chose how large and powerful they would become (*boundaries of their dwellings*) He worked in all the nations so “*they should seek the Lord.*” God’s purpose in working with the nations is the same as that for each individual. We are to pray all men and for kings and all in authority, because God wants all men to be saved.

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. 3 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth 1Tim. 2:1-4

God also wants us to understand that the reasons nations come and go is because God wants no one to perish, but all to come to repentance. When it seems (as it did to Habbakuk) that God is somehow slack in His actions, we have to stop and reflect that this is the longsuffering of God not willing for any to perish.

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. 2Pet. 3:8-9

God uses both individuals and nations in His desire that all men to be saved, no one perish, all come to a knowledge of the truth, and come to repentance. All of this is inferred in Paul’s statement that it is all “*in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him.*”

God revealed to Jeremiah that as the man’s freewill determines how God will deal with each individual, so also the freewill of the collective individuals that make up a nation also determine how God will deal with them. When a nation is good, God determines to bless them and when they are evil His righteous judgment will bring a curse on them.

The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, 8 if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. 9 And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, 10 if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it. Jer. 18:1-10

This is what made the preaching of the prophets so important. Repentance changed everything. God would bless any nation that repented and would destroy any nation that would not. Most of the prophecies found in the Old Testament are not Messianic. They are prophecies of God’s assessment of nations and what the future held for them. Most of the time these prophecies were made against the divided nations of Israel and Judah. But entire books as well as chapters in other books are dedicated to the warnings to other nations that they too were in peril.

So what about this pandemic? Did it come directly from God in judgment? Is it just another event in time and chance that happens to all? We don’t know because God hasn’t revealed it to us as He did with the prophets. We have principles, but not direct revelation. But it doesn’t really matter. It is a catastrophe that should lead to repentance. If it leads to repentance, God will be pleased, if it doesn’t lead to repentance and humility, then we are proving to God that we are rotten to the core.