

Where is God When God's People Suffer?

A Meditation on the Earthquake in Haiti

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January 17, 2010

When disaster strikes, like the earthquake we've seen in Haiti, to ask the question, "Where is God in all of this?"

We can begin to answer this question by reminding ourselves of what we *don't* believe. One prominent televangelist has suggested that this horrible tragedy is essentially the consequence of a "pact to the devil" that was supposedly made by some of Haiti's founders about 200 years ago.

Let's see if such a theory makes any sense at all. It assumes that a person – or a group of people on behalf of a nation – can make a pact with the devil. While there are stories in literature and film of such a thing, there is not one example in the Bible of a human being making a pact with the devil. Satan *tried* with Jesus, and Jesus rejected his offer three times. And it's questionable whether any such gathering ever occurred. Reputable Haitian historians will tell you that there is simply no documentation of this event beyond its vivid retelling; unfortunately, with each re-telling the rumor sounds more like truth, especially when it fits into our preconceived worldview.

But let's assume for a moment that such a gathering did take place. This televangelist's punishment "theology" assumes that Haiti is being punished by *God* for this pact – as if God would punish millions, indiscriminately, including the Archbishop of Haiti, hundreds of Haitian pastors, and church volunteer missionaries who went there to help the poor. Or it assumes that Haiti is under the control of the Devil as a result of this pact – as if God would willingly give up "to the Devil" millions of Haitian people in perpetuity – innocent men, women, children, most of them Christian -- because of a deal struck by a few terribly misguided individuals. Either way, punishment theology pictures God completely outside of Haiti's suffering, dispassionately allowing it to happen, or worse, inflicting it himself. This theology also envisions God, through the earthquake,

willingly inflicting a death sentence on a generation and condemning many to an eternal life apart from himself.

But is that how God works? I always tell people, if you want to know how God works, look at Jesus. He's the best picture of God-in-action that we have. And how did Jesus feel about the physical and mental suffering of others? He healed them. He never blamed people for their own illness. And the *one* time when someone suggested that a person's ailment might be punishment for sin, Jesus flat-out rejected that theory and the underlying punishment theology.(John 9:2).

Personal or national disasters are not punishments for sin; if God ever worked that way, God no longer does. The Bible tells us plainly that God causes the sun and rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. (Matthew 5:45) Punishment and reward do indeed occur, but in the *next* life, not this one.

And what does Jesus' cross say to us about God and suffering? The cross reminds us that God understands pain: physical, emotional, and spiritual. He has felt the crushing, the piercing, the thirst, the loneliness, the bitterness, and the sense of abandonment. The cross reminds us that God knows what it feels like to watch a beloved child, an *only* child, die. The cross reminds us that God would rather die than allow us to spend eternity apart from him.

When Kari and I were in Haiti ten years ago, meeting the two boys that we sponsor there face-to-face, we learned that it's this knowledge -- that God is with the suffering and understands their pain -- that has gotten the people of Haiti through so much sorrow and difficulty in years past. God is not far from the people of Haiti these days, judging them from a safe distance. God is with them – and we are with them. That's the way God is and God's people are. When people are hurting we don't point fingers of blame: we lift shovels to help.

Punishment theology is the flip side of "prosperity" theology. Maybe you've heard of it. It assumes that national or personal prosperity is somehow linked to God's favor (the more faithful you are, the more pleased God will be with you, and the more you'll be blessed materially in this lifetime; the less faithful you are, the less pleased God will be with you, and the less you'll be blessed materially). It's sometimes expressed by

prosperity ministers as “Sow a faith-seed now,” (through a generous financial gift to their particular ministry) “and reap a harvest of blessing tomorrow.” You know who gets rich in this theology? Prosperity ministers do, not the faithful people most in need.

Why is a predominantly Christian nation like Haiti so poor? Punishment/prosperity theology blames Haiti’s founders and her regular citizens. But we don’t have to blame God, the Devil, or ordinary people for Haiti’s current suffering. We’ve seen this pattern around the world:

Government Corruption
Exploitation by Foreign Companies
Overpopulation
Destruction of the Local Environment
+ Frequent Natural Disasters
Extreme Poverty

It’s not difficult to explain Haiti’s poverty. What *is* difficult is fixing it. We’ve tried for decades and gotten almost nowhere.

Haiti’s situation is, indeed, in many ways the result of sinful behavior – but it’s a different kind of sin than we ordinarily think of. It’s not so much personal sin – like a person somehow making a pact with the devil – but systematic sin – the kind that we all end up being part of when we live in a world sharply divided between “haves” and “have nots.” Remember, Haiti was founded by wealthy nations who imported slaves to extract Haiti’s rich resources with no thought of the welfare of the slaves themselves. In the 20th century foreign governments, including our own, supported a series of dictators, who systematically abused their own people through fear and intimidation. To blame the Haitian people for their suffering while not holding others accountable for their part in it is patently unfair.

The problem with punishment/prosperity theology is that it is neither Biblical nor historical (plenty of faithful people are poor and plenty of rich people are not faithful). It causes victims of disaster or disease to blame themselves for their own suffering. It allows the healthy and wealthy to feel that their blessings are some kind of justly deserved divine reward; and they can end up ignoring the plight of the poor rather than doing whatever they can to assist. And it doesn’t take into account the fact that Haiti is a humble nation, primarily of Christians, trying very hard to be faithful and to make

ends meet. Punishment/prosperity theology keeps most people poor, and it robs people of the true hope that they have in Jesus Christ who said, "I am with you always."

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