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September 2005 E-Teaching, Part 2

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Hurricane Jesus, Part 2

This month's e-teaching about Hurricane Katrina and God's wrath elicited quite a few e-responses, and the encouraging ones outnumbered the not-so-encouraging ones by about fifteen to one.

With the ratio of favorable to not-as-favorable responses being so lopsided, I debated if I should address, in another e-teaching, the objections of those who disagreed with me. In the end, I decided to respond for at least three reasons. First, because the letters of disagreement were for the most part written by sincere people who graciously shared their objections. Second, at one time I would have agreed with quite a few of the objections that were made. That certainly motivated me to be merciful toward my detractors. And third, although only a few people who wrote disagreed, I happen to know that their objections are shared by many others, having heard them for years around the world. What is at stake is eternal salvation for everyone who might hear an explanation of Hurricane Katrina that effectively nullifies the fear of God and His call to repentance. And with Rita now bearing down on Texas, it seems the Lord Himself is repeating His message.

Below I've paraphrased the five best objections I received, and I've done my best to answer those objections from Scripture and logic. We will once again see that faulty interpretation of the Bible is often the result of reading scriptures out of context. The most fundamental rule of interpreting the Bible is this: A correct interpretation of any given verse will harmonize with the rest of the Bible.

Objection #1: "Because Jesus has died for the sins of the world, God is treating the world differently than He was before the church age, this 'age of grace.' That is why we read so much about God's judgment and wrath in the Old Testament but not in the New Testament. Thus Hurricane Katrina was not a manifestation of God's wrath, as it may have been had it occurred in Old Testament times."

First, the reason that we read more about God's judgment and wrath in the Old Testament than in the New Testament is not because God, who declared that He never changes (see Mal. 3:6), changed, and now possesses a new and improved grace. Rather, it is because the Old Testament covers a historical period of approximately four thousand years, whereas the New Testament (from Jesus' birth to the end of the books of Acts) covers a historical period of less than seventy years. Because God is so long-suffering, He restrains His wrath for years---and sometimes for decades and centuries---as is so obvious from reading the Old Testament. During the space of four thousand years of Old Testament history there were plenty of times when God's mercy ended and His judgment fell. The New Testament, covering a much shorter span of time, does not contain as many examples of the same.

There are indeed, however, records of some natural disasters that occurred during the short space of recorded New Testament history, even after Jesus died, such as a severe famine and a hurricane (see Acts 11:28; 27:14-15). Additionally, after Jesus died, we have New Testament examples of people dropping dead due to God's judgment, such as Ananias, Sapphira, and Herod Agrippa, just as in the Old Testament (see Acts 5:1-11; 12:23). Jesus' death didn't prevent those manifestations of God's wrath. Moreover, just *after* the New Testament historical record ended, God sent *cataclysmic* judgment on Jerusalem in the form of Roman Legions, and hundreds of thousands of Christ-rejecting Jews were massacred, a divine judgment Jesus had foretold (see Luke 13:34-35; 19:42-44; 21:20-24). Although the Roman siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was not a natural disaster, it was certainly a manifestation of God's wrath like the many Old Testament examples of the same, and one that Jesus' death and the alleged "age of grace" didn't prevent.

Second, it seems obvious that since Jesus died, natural disasters have been just as frequent in human history, if not more frequent. So we can't help but ask, "If God took credit for judging sinners by means of certain natural disasters for four thousand years* but He has since taken a break, who has been causing them for the last two thousand years? And if God isn't as angry as He was during the Old Testament time because of Jesus' death, then why doesn't He *stop* those natural disasters that have been just as frequent since Jesus died?"

Third, if Jesus' death about 2,000 years ago has changed God's wrathful dealings with earth's inhabitants, what is the book of Revelation doing in the New Testament, a description of God's wrath that occurs after Jesus' death? Are we to think that God caused natural disasters for four-thousand years, took a break for 2,000 years (during which time natural disasters have never ceased in the least), and then will resume causing unprecedented natural disasters in the near future?

Fourth, doesn't it seem somewhat inconsistent to think that, had Katrina hit one day before Jesus died, she would have been a manifestation of God's decision to pour out His wrath upon deserving sinners, but had she hit one day after Jesus died, she would have been a manifestation of God's weakness and inability to stop a hurricane that somehow occurred outside of His will and which He would have preferred to have never existed because Jesus' death changed His attitude toward sinners? The more we consider this particular objection the more absurd it becomes.

And fifth, if God is not pouring out His wrath on sinners since Jesus' death, what did Paul mean when he, speaking of Christ-rejecting Jews who killed Jesus and hindered him from preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, wrote, "But wrath has come upon them to the utmost" (1 Thes. 2:16)?

Objection #2: "Paul wrote that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them' (2 Cor. 5:18). Because Jesus has reconciled the world through His death, God is not holding their sins against them just as 2 Corinthians 5:18 says, and He is not angry with them. Thus He would never send a hurricane to judge them."

This is a scripture I've heard abused in this way for years. The problem is, such an interpretation flatly contradicts hundreds of other scriptures. Such an interpretation violates the most fundamental rule of Bible interpretation.

In 2 Corinthians 5:18, Paul was simply speaking of how Jesus, during His earthly ministry, had a ministry of reconciliation. That is, He spent His time attempting to reconcile people to Himself, which is not surprising, as reconciliation with Himself seems to be God's major priority. And how did Jesus attempt to reconcile people to Himself? He did it by calling people to repentance. Obviously, Jesus succeeded in reconciling some to Himself and failed to reconcile others to Himself. Not everyone repented. Some of them killed Him, hardly a picture of reconciliation.

Those who repented, however, were indeed reconciled to Him. They were the fruit of Jesus' "ministry of reconciliation," and He no longer counted their sins against them. They were forgiven. That is what Paul meant. Jesus' act of "not counting their trespasses against them" came *after* their repentance and reconciliation with Him, not *before*, as some construe this verse to say in contradiction to the rest of the New Testament as well as simple logic.

How much more obvious could it be in the New Testament? The only people against whom God is not counting their trespasses are those who have repented and believed in Jesus. God is obviously still counting everyone else's trespasses against them (see Col. 3:5-6), and currently He is mercifully giving them time to repent. If they don't repent before His mercy ends, they will suffer His full wrath---which they have been storing up for themselves (see Rom. 2:5). That is precisely why we are called to "preach *repentance* for the *forgiveness of sins*" (see Luke 24:47).

In this same passage under consideration, Paul went on to say that God had also given him a "ministry of reconciliation." Thus he wrote, "Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). Paul obviously did not believe that everyone was reconciled to God or that God was not holding the sins of the unrepentant against them because Jesus had died. Rather, he clearly believed that people had to *do* something if they were to be reconciled to God. They, of course, had to repent.

Because God is indeed holding people's trespasses against them, there is no basis on which to claim rightly that He is not angry towards them and thus would not limitedly pour out his wrath on them in the form of a hurricane.

Objection #3: "When the disciples wanted to call fire down from heaven on a village of the Samaritans who refused them lodging, Jesus rebuked His disciples, declaring that He did not come to destroy men's lives but to save men's lives (see Luke 9:52-56). So it is wrong to say that Jesus or God sent a hurricane that destroyed people's lives."

I suppose if that incident were the only incident in Scripture, we could buy into that interpretation. But we have a little problem. God has given us an entire Bible.

The disciples certainly revealed a major misconception about God that day. To call down fire on people because they won't let you stay in their town overnight is a *little bit* severe, wouldn't you say? The punishment hardly fits the crime. God is generally a little more long-suffering than that! Fire from heaven is reserved for places like Sodom and Gomorrah, and only after lots of patient warning.

Jesus was not saying that He would *never* send fire down from heaven to consume sinners, because there is record in the Bible of Him doing that very thing (see Gen. 19:24; 2 Kings 1:10-12, Rev. 20:9). But He wanted His disciples to know that His desire is that "no one perish, but that all would come to repentance" (see 2 Pet. 3:9). He "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (see Ezek. 33:11). He prefers salvation to judgment, and so He always displays incredible mercy and long-suffering before He displays His wrath.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus was displaying His mercy, just as we would expect of a merciful God, doing all He could to bring sinners to repentance so they would avoid His future wrath. He made it clear, however, that His "mercy-mode" would eventually end. Fire was coming. Jesus once said, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled" (Luke 12:49). There would come a day when He would return to the earth again, and then it would not be to save people's lives, but to destroy them. The fearful angelic warning will then be fulfilled, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in the full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the

presence of the Lamb" (Rev. 14:9-10, emphasis added).

Between the "full-mercy-mode" of His first coming and His "full-wrath-mode" of His future coming, is it unreasonable to expect a mixture of both during the interim? In fact, would not some judgment mixed with mercy serve as a loving warning to those who are in danger of suffering his full wrath as it draws nearer?

To say that Jesus' response to the disciples when they requested to call fire from heaven theologically disallows God's destruction of anyone in the future by any means is to say that God did not send an angel to kill Herod as the Bible says He did (see Acts 12:23), that God had nothing to do with the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira which He obviously did (see Acts 5:1-11), that God's judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70 did not occur, and that the Jesus of the book of Revelation is not truly Jesus.

Jesus rebuked His disciples that day because their hearts were wrong (see Luke 9:55), clearly revealed by their eagerness to see some Samaritans, who had hurt their feelings, fry. Jesus was not redefining God's character or nullifying His temporal judgments and righteous wrath.

Objection #4: "Jesus said in John 10:10 that the devil comes to kill, steal and destroy, but that He came that we might have abundant life. If that is true, then Hurricane Katrina was not from Jesus, but the devil." It killed, stole and destroyed."

Again, if John 10:10 were the only verse in the Bible, this objection would make sense, but we have thousands of other verses that balance our understanding. This objection is also an example of how Scripture is so often misquoted, and how false interpretations are then derived from a misquotation.

Jesus never said, "The *devil* comes to kill, steal and destroy." He said, "The *thief* comes to kill, steal and destroy." If you will read His words in context (see John 10:1-10), you will see that He was not talking about the devil, but about false teachers (like the scribes and Pharisees) who rob people of eternal life by propagating what contradicts God's Word.

In the passage under consideration, Jesus was simply contrasting Himself with false teachers. They, like thieves, killed people (spiritually), stole from them (the truth and eternal life) which ultimately resulted in their destruction (in hell). That is the fruit of their "ministries." The fruit of Jesus' ministry, however, is life, abundant life.

A few other verses among the thousands we might consider to help us better balance our understanding of John 10:10 are Matt. 10:26; Luke 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 3:17 and Jas. 4:12, all of which say that God kills and/or destroys, and all of which are in the New Testament. For example, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear; fear the One who, after He has *killed*, is able to *destroy* both soul and body in hell" (Luke 12:4-5; Matt. 10:26, emphasis added). Paul warned of the same potential destroyer: "If any man destroys the

temple of God, God will *destroy* him" (1 Cor. 3:17, emphasis added). And so did James, "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and *destroy*" (Jas. 4:12, emphasis added). Thus, those who claim that Satan is the source of all death and destruction display an incredible lack of knowledge of the Bible. There are hundreds of references in Scripture of God destroying and killing.

Objection #5: "We live in a fallen world, and that is why these kinds of natural disasters occur. Scripture speaks of the earth groaning in birth pains awaiting the return of the Lord to make it anew. The reason that the earth is groaning is because of the curse which was released upon it through Adam's sin. These groanings include natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes. However, again this is not to say that God brought these things." (With the exception of the first sentence, this is an exact quotation that I was sent from a fairly well-known Bible teacher's website that attempts to explain Hurricane Katrina.)

This explanation is not an explanation at all, because it raises more questions than it answers. For example, what is meant by the phrase, "We live in a fallen world, and that is why natural disasters occur"? Does that mean that Adam's sin is the *sole* cause of every natural disaster? That we should look at every earthquake, hurricane and famine and say, "Adam caused that"? That God is not part of the equation at all? If so, Adam must have been a pretty powerful guy. Although he's been dead for thousands of years, he's caused cataclysmic disasters that have taken the lives of millions right up to our present day!

No, what could only be meant *intelligently* by that phrase is that Adam's sin resulted in *God's judgment* that is manifested in natural disasters. God can't be removed from the equation. But notice the author's words above. He writes of "a curse which was released upon earth through Adam's sin." He is afraid to say that it was God's curse. But if it wasn't God's curse, where did that curse come from? Who "released" (as he says) that curse?

You can see that this particular explanation is just an attempt to avoid what is obvious. Anyone who reads Genesis 3 easily sees that the curses of the Fall that came upon the devil, the man and woman, and the ground, all came from God's own lips. The curse was *God's* curse because of *His* judgment. So if the groanings of which Paul wrote "include natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes" as the above-quoted teacher says, and if "the reason that the earth is groaning is because of the curse which was released upon it through Adam's sin" as he also says, then hurricanes and earthquakes are from God, because He is the one who "released the curse" when Adam sinned.

May I also point out that the above-quoted explanation implies that God actually is unhappy about natural disasters that are caused by the "release of a curse" from some mysterious source. But if that is so, then why doesn't He stop those disasters? Is Adam more powerful than God, setting in motion something that God can't stop? The answers to these questions are obvious.

And what about Paul's words in Romans 8:22 regarding the whole creation groaning and suffering the pains of childbirth?

Consider the immediate context of his words:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now (Rom. 8:20-22).

Paul declared that, "the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but *because of Him* [God] *who subjected it*." That is a reference to the fact that creation is under a curse, and not some sourceless, mysterious curse, but *God's* curse. Consequently, the whole creation now "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth."

That being so, *if* Paul had hurricanes and earthquakes in mind as evidences of the groaning creation (and I'm not saying that he did), then he was affirming that their source is God's curse. And even if they are random, they are random because of God's curse, and thus He is responsible for them. Additionally, it goes without saying that divine curses are indications, not of God's approval, but of His disapproval.

In Conclusion

Isn't it interesting that we can so easily identify the *tiniest* evidences of God's goodness---warm sunshine on a cool day, the taste of a crisp autumn apple, the healing of some minor sickness---yet we are seemingly unable to identify cataclysmic evidences of God's righteous wrath, such as hurricanes and earthquakes? Isn't it amazing that throughout all human history, people of a multitude of religious traditions have been identifying natural disasters as evidence of the displeasure of a righteous God (or gods), but that many evangelical Christians, including preachers, whose sacred book repeatedly affirms God's responsibility in these things,* can offer no logical or biblical explanation for people suffering a natural disaster and whom God is trying to save from His eternal wrath? "If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?" (Amos 3:6).

Our problem is that we have been inebriated with a false gospel of an all-love-no-wrath God. That false conception of God we convey to the world, robbing them of the very thing that might lead them to repentance---the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom.

The apostle Peter said, "I most certainly understand now that...the man who fears Him [God] and does what is right is welcome to Him (Acts 10:34-35). *When will we understand this simple truth?*

*For God's role in earthquakes, see Num. 16:23-24; Is. 29:6; Jer. 10:10; Ezek. 38:19; Ps. 18:7; 77:18; Hag. 2:6; Matt. 27:51, 54; 28:2; Luke 21:11; Acts 4:31; 16:26; Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13; 16:18. For hurricanes and wind control see Gen. 8:11; Ex. 10:13,19; 14:21; 15:10; Num. 11:31; Ps. 48:7; 78:76; 107: 23-25; 135:7; 147:18; 148:8; Is. 11:15; 27:8; Jer. 10:13; 51:16; Ezek. 13:11,13; Amos 4:9,13; Jonah 1:4; 4:8; Hag. 2:17; Rev. 7:1. For famines see Deut. 32:23-24; 2 Sam. 21:1; 24:12-13; 2 Kin. 8:1; Ps. 105:16; Is. 14:30; Jer. 11:22; 14:12,15-16; 16:3-4; 24:10; 27:8; 29:17; 34:17; 42:17; 44:12-13; Ezek. 5:12,16-17; 6:12; 12:16; 14:13, 21; 36:29; Hag. 1:9-11; Matt. 5:45; Rev. 6:8; 18:8.