

Does God Use Natural Disasters to Judge People and Nations?

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Within weeks, nine western states have battled forest fires while two record-breaking hurricanes have inundated our southern and eastern coastlines with water. On August 25, Hurricane Harvey struck Houston, Texas in what the *Washington Post* called an unprecedented “1,000-year flood event”, dropping more than 50 inches of rain within a few days.^{1,2} One week later, the largest forest fire in the history of Los Angeles was ignited on September 1.³ And two weeks later, Hurricane Irma traveled directly up the entire state of Florida. Boasting wind speeds of up to 185 mph, this 400-mile-wide, category 5, super-hurricane is the second most powerful Atlantic hurricane on record.^{4,5} Although it was lowered to a category 4 storm by the time it made landfall in Florida, 650,000 Florida residents were ordered to evacuate their homes in anticipation of up to 15-foot storm surges.^{6,7}

As we stand in the wake of catastrophic devastation, it is natural that we question God’s role in natural disasters. In a conversation on the Jim Bakker Show, Founder of Morning Star Ministries Rick Joyner and televangelist Jim Bakker agreed that Hurricane Harvey is a judgment from God. Jim Bakker admitted, “I have felt - and I was afraid to share with anybody - that this flood is from God. It’s a judgment on America somehow.”⁸ Likewise, anti-LGBT activist Pastor Kevin Swanson argued that Hurricane Harvey is God’s judgment upon Houston for its recent aggressively pro-LGBT mayor, its persecution of churches and pastors, and its refusal to politically stand against transgenderism.⁹

It is common, in the aftermath of any severe natural disaster, for some to boldly declare it to be God’s judgment upon evil deeds. Like Elijah, it is easy to assume that God must be communicating through major events. However, Elijah failed to find God in the whirlwind, the earthquake, or the fire, finding Him instead in the sound of a low whisper (1 Kings 19:11-12). Bad things happen because we live in a fallen world that is subject to the effects of sin, and it is unfair to blame God for them all. Nevertheless, there are times when God chooses to use calamity to accomplish His will.

As the Creator God, it should not surprise us to discover that God uses His creation to accomplish His will. Within the context of warning of pending judgment, [Amos 4:13](#) reminds us that God is

¹ Samenow, “Harvey is a 1,000-Year Flood Event Unprecedented in Scale.”

² Rocheleau, “What Would Happen If Boston Got 50 Inches of Rain?”

³ “Los Angeles Wildfires: City Battles ‘Largest Fire in History’.”

⁴ Berkowitz, “Hurricane Irma: How Big is It?”

⁵ Etehad, “How Hurricane Irma became the Second-Strongest Atlantic Hurricane on Record.”

⁶ Regan, “Hurricane Irma Could Create One of the Largest Mass Evacuations in U.S. History.”

⁷ Danner, “Irma’s Path Shifts to Florida’s Southwest Coast, Catastrophic Storm Surge Expected.”

⁸ Taylor, “Televangelist Jim Bakker on Hurricane Harvey: ‘Flood is from God,’ a ‘Judgment on America’.”

⁹ Mantyla, “Kevin Swanson: Hurricane Harvey is God’s Judgment on Houston for Having a ‘Very Aggressively Pro-Homosexual Mayor.’”

sovereign over creation, “*For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!*” Similarly, the Psalmist notes in Psalm 18:11–14 that God wraps Himself in storm clouds as though they were His garment, and His voice is heard in thunderings, flashes of lightening, hailstones, and coals of fire.

In His sovereignty, God need not send disaster upon us. Rather, He may simply lift His hand of protection. In His love, God readily protects us from much of what may otherwise naturally occur. But we should not expect God to continually withhold such disaster when we are in rebellion to Him. At some point, He may choose to lift His hand of protection for a time, allowing nature to take its course as a means of challenging our rebellion and of reminding us of our reliance upon Him.

In lifting His hand of protection, sometimes God’s will is that evil deeds be judged. In [Ezekiel chapter 13](#), God condemned Israel’s religious leaders who misled the people by pretending to speak for the Lord when they were truly speaking from their own desires. According to [Ezekiel 13:11 and](#)

[13-14](#), God prophesied judgment, saying:

“There will be a deluge of rain, and you, O great hailstones, will fall, and a stormy wind break out. ... Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: I will make a stormy wind break out in my wrath, and there shall be a deluge of rain in my anger, and great hailstones in wrath to make a full end. And I will break down the wall that you have smeared with whitewash, and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you shall perish in the midst of it, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

God can, and has, used natural disasters to punish wickedness. Sometimes natural disasters are God’s means of reminding the world of His righteousness, justice, and sovereignty. Other times, God’s will is that people seek refuge from calamity by returning to Him in repentance and righteousness. In [Amos chapter 4:6-10](#), God reveals how He used famine, drought, blight, and pestilence to alert the Israelites to the danger they were in due to their rebellion against God. His intent was not to punish sin, but to draw the people back to Himself. Nevertheless, Amos repeatedly laments, “yet you did not return to me, declares the LORD.”

C.S. Lewis said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹⁰ Without the incentive of pain and discomfort, we as humans rarely feel the need to change our behavior. God knows that being in a right relationship with Himself is more important than temporary comfort, pleasures, or safety. As such, He

¹⁰ Rogers, “What Did Jesus Say about Natural Disasters?”

sometimes allows tragedy to strike in a merciful attempt to reveal to us the peril of remaining in rebellion to Him.

It is difficult to witness the grief of losing loved ones to death, the breaking apart of families, and the suffering of children, and conclude that they may be experiencing God's mercy. Nevertheless, this is the teaching of Amos. In fact, [Amos 4:2-3](#) declares that because Israel failed to respond to the warnings that God sent using natural causes, the people would experience a severe judgment when foreigners conquered them and used meat hooks to drag many of them away into captivity.

Frightening as an encounter with the unbridled forces of nature may be, it is far less terrifying than a reckoning with He who controls the forces of nature. As such, God sometimes uses our helplessness in the face of His creation to remind us that we are not truly in control and that we are in great peril if we remain in rebellion to Him who is in control. Therefore, sometimes God uses natural disasters to teach people about His righteousness and their need to repent ([Isa. 26:9](#)).

Lest we be tempted to believe that God allows disaster to come upon those who are most deserving, recall the words of Jesus in [Luke chapter 13](#). Jesus challenged this assumption when He asked in [Luke 13:4-5](#), *“Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”* Just because disaster strikes some, does not mean that they were more deserving of it than others. Instead, disaster can befall anyone who is in rebellion to God, regardless of whether there are others who may be more wicked. Such disaster should serve as a warning signal to all of us that we do not know what tomorrow brings, so we best be certain, today, that we are right with God ([James 4:14](#)).

We cannot be certain whether this concurrence of record-breaking phenomenon and natural disasters striking our nation is from God, but it is reasonable to suspect that it may be a result of Him lifting His hand of blessing and protection. The magnitude of these events combined with their timing is surprising enough to prompt us to question whether God may be using them to challenge our complacency and to provoke us to evaluate our relationship with Him.

[Second Chronicles 15:1-7](#), recounts how God “troubled [Israel] with every sort of distress” in an effort to capture their attention, to incite them to forsake their wickedness, and to return to God. As a nation, we celebrate and flaunt the very sins that compelled God to judge other nations in the past ([Lev. 18](#)). Could it be that God is using these natural disasters as part of a process of troubling our nation with every sort of distress in a fervent attempt to call us to repentance? The very fact that we cannot definitively reject such a suggestion should give us pause. It reveals that we know that we are not right with God. It reveals that we know that we have embraced sinful behavior that is deserving of divine judgment. Clearly there are some things we need to change regardless of what the cause behind these natural disasters may be.

It is not important that we be able to definitively identify God's role in these events. What is important is that we know that our conscience is clear before God. And natural disasters conveniently encourage us toward such evaluation.

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