

# GOD IN THE STORM: THE GOODNESS OF GOD AND THE REALITY OF EVIL

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**I**t has been two years since Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast. By the time the storm ended, it had become one of the costliest and deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States. The memories of the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina once again raised questions about the goodness and power of God. These are not easy questions, and they are not questions that simply fade away. Not just any answer to them will suffice. If we are to understand how to think rightly about God and the storm, we must look to the testimony of Scripture.

In Job 37, Elihu, one of Job's friends, speaks to him:

*Out of the south comes the storm, and out of the north the cold. From the breath of God ice is made, and the expanse of the waters is frozen. Also with moisture He loads the thick cloud; he disperses the cloud of His lightning. It changes direction, turning around by His guidance, that it may do whatever He commands it on the face of the inhabited earth, whether for correction, or for His world, or for lovingkindness, He causes it to happen. [Job 37:9-13]*

At the end of the book of Job, God rebukes three of Job's friends for making inaccurate statements both about Job's suffering and about God. Elihu, however, is not rebuked. Elihu spoke truthfully, saying to Job, in effect, "You cannot take God out of this equation. You cannot say that God is not in the storm. He is." Throughout the Bible, but particularly in the book of Job, we are reminded that we simply do not have the option of saying that God is somehow not involved. If we say we believe in the sovereignty of God, we must believe that God is always and everywhere sovereign—even over the storm.

The playwright Archibald MacLeish wrote a work entitled *J.B.*, which was a modern rendering of the book of Job. In that play is the famous line, "If God is good, He is not God. If God is God, He is not good." This is the equation many people wrestle with in the face of destruction like that of Hurricane Katrina: If God is sovereign, and if He controls every atom and molecule of the universe, then how in the face of so many evils can modern human beings affirm that He is good? On the other hand, if we believe that God is good, then He must not be in control. He must not be able to keep these things from happening, and therefore, He is not the all-powerful God of the Bible. In the end, it is asserted, if God is God, then He cannot possibly be good; but if He is good, then He is not God.

As Christians, we must be able to give a biblical answer to these questions. No superficial answer will do, and we will either take our stand with God's self-revelation in the Bible, or we will invent a deity of our own imagination.

## SOME BAD ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION

Unfortunately, but inevitably, there are several bad answers that have been offered in an attempt to handle these issues. One of the most common is this: “God is doing the best He can under the circumstances.”

In 1981, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner published a book entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner's answer to his own question was that it is because God simply cannot help it. He cannot stop evil. Essentially, God is a God of limited power, doing the best He can under the circumstances, and therefore, we should just trust Him to do all He can to prevent evil. Of course, we might wish He could do better, but finally, there is only so much that God can do. When a person faces a dread disease or a storm, an earthquake, or a tsunami, his only course of action is simply to believe that God is doing the very best He can do and to know that God really could not have kept this from happening. After all, if God could have kept it from happening, He would have done so. Proponents of open theism make a similar argument, saying that God is infinitely resourceful even though he is not sovereign. In other words, he is always ready with Plan B when Plan A fails.

Against that argument, the Bible reveals that God is omnipotent and omniscient. These are unconditional and categorical attributes. The sovereignty of God is one of the bedrock affirmations of biblical theism. The Creator rules over all creation. Not even a sparrow falls without His knowledge, and he knows the number of hairs upon our heads. God rules and reigns over all nations and principalities. Not one atom or molecule of the universe is outside His active rule. Even King Nebuchadnezzar recognized this by the end, and confessed that God “does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” [Daniel 4:36]. This is no limited sovereignty. The God of the Bible causes the rising and falling of nations and empires, and His rule is active and universal.

A second inadequate answer when we ponder God and the storm is to say, as some might, “Sure, God could have stopped the hurricane, but He did not do so because He has an evil intent. Our days are numbered, and He is going to get us all one way or another. Cancer for one person, an earthquake for another. Life in the end is meaningless, and God is like the Hindu deity Shiva, the Destroyer.”

The Bible, however, does not allow that argument. God is absolute righteousness, love, goodness, and justice. Most errors related to this issue occur because of our human tendency to impose an external standard—a human construction of goodness—upon God. But good does not so much define God, as God defines good.

Both of these arguments therefore fall infinitely short of the biblical testimony. The God of the Bible cannot be described as “doing the very best He can do under the circumstances.” Nor can one read the Bible and seriously affirm that God is a God of evil. He is a God of love, mercy, and holiness.

How then are we to put all of this together? At a bare minimum, we should listen to how the Lord answers Job out of a whirlwind in Job 38:

*Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who enclosed the sea with doors when, bursting forth, it went out from the womb; when I made a cloud its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and I placed boundaries on it and set a bolt and doors, and I said, "Thus far you shall come, but no farther; and here shall your proud waves stop? Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, and caused the dawn to know its place, that it might take hold of the ends of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? [Job 38:1-13]*

And then:

*Who has cleft a channel for the flood, or a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land without people, on a desert without a man in it, to satisfy the waste and desolate land and to make the seeds of the grass to sprout? Has the rain a father? Or who has begotten the drops of dew? From whose womb has come the ice? And the frost of heaven, who has given it birth? Water becomes hard like stone and the surface of the deep is imprisoned. [Job 38:25-30]*

Throughout this chapter, God rebukes Job, saying in effect, “Who are you to question Me? What right have you, the creature—a suffering creature, yes, and a creature with many questions—but who has given you the right to interrogate Me?” At the beginning of chapter 40, the Lord concludes His argument: “Then the Lord said to Job, ‘Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it.’” [Job 40:1] It is hard to imagine a more severe and direct indictment than what God says here to Job. Where were you when I made the world? Remind Me again how you set the sun on its course. Remind Me of how you set the limits on the waters.

Job's response is entirely appropriate. “Then Job answered the Lord and said, ‘Behold I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; even twice, and I will add nothing more.’” [Job 40:3] He continues,

*I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore, I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me. I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees you. Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes. [Job 42:1-6]*

What we should learn from Job's response is that while we are to seek to understand what God is doing in the midst of this crisis, we must do so with a humble heart. Thus we should never act as if we can explain exactly why God allowed this tragedy to happen, and we should never give in to the temptation to say, “I know why this storm hit, and I know why this storm hit *where* it did.” “New Orleans is a sinful city,” some say. “The Lord sent this storm because of the casinos in the gulf and because of the wickedness in the city of New Orleans.” To make such a claim, however, is to go far beyond the bounds of human knowledge. We are simply not given the right to say with such precision why this tragedy—

or any other natural disaster—has occurred. Jesus made this same point in John chapter 9. Jesus and His disciples came across a man who was blind from birth. His disciples wanted to know if it was this man's sin or the sin of his parents that had caused his blindness. Jesus responded, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him." [John 9:3] God's purposes are beyond our understanding, and the Lord simply does not explain or seek to justify His ways to humankind. Thus, Christians should consistently affirm the sovereignty of God and the righteousness of God's ways, even as we await the full revelation of His purposes in the age to come.

## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN THE BIG PICTURE

An event as large and catastrophic as Hurricane Katrina can only be understood rightly in the context of the full teaching of Scripture. It is not enough to focus on one or two texts. On the contrary, we must look at the big picture and draw our conclusions only in light of the entire storyline of the Bible. Then we will be able to affirm both the goodness and sovereignty of God as the ground of our salvation and the assurance of our own good.

Genesis chapter one states: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters." [Genesis 1:1-2] From there, God creates the entire cosmos—light, the moon, the sun, stars, fish, birds, and animals—simply by speaking them all into existence. And at every point of creation, Scripture tells us that God declared His work to be "good." Throughout this entire sequential unfolding of creation, the divine verdict is consistently, "It is good." In fact, at the end of chapter one, "God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good." [Genesis 1:31]

The big story thus begins with God bringing glory to Himself by creating an order, a cosmos, a universe, a planet, and everything on this planet is very good. The Lord looked at His own work and declared it good—not just better than it could have been, but very good, which is to say, *perfect*.

In Genesis chapter two, the story continues with the creation and differentiation of man and woman, and the institution of marriage. So we read, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." [Genesis 2:24-25] At the end of chapter two then, the world is still a picture of perfection. One might wish that the story had ended there, with the world in perfect bliss and the man and woman in perfect innocence—naked and not ashamed before their Creator. Unfortunately, however, Genesis one and two are followed by Genesis three.

Genesis three tells the story of the Fall, a story that centers in the volitional, willful act of Adam and Eve to break the command of God, and to do that which the Lord had forbidden. Giving themselves to temptation, they rationalized their desires, justified their action in their own eyes, and ate the fruit that was forbidden them.

“Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ And the woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate it.’” [Genesis 3:13] No one escapes God's condemnation for this rebellion. In the next few verses, He curses them all—the serpent, the woman, and the man. Finally, and significantly, God pronounces a curse on all of creation: “Cursed is the ground because of you,” he tells Adam. “In toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will be bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” [Genesis 3:17b-19]

When humans sinned, not only did it affect Adam and Eve and their descendants, but the earth—the cosmos itself—was corrupted. After Genesis three, we must speak of humanity as being in a fallen state, but many of us forget that creation itself is fallen, too. The creation is cursed. If the Fall had never occurred, there would be no hurricanes, no tsunamis, no earthquakes, and no forest fires. There would be no droughts and no floods. Before the Fall, the Lord declared the world to be very good. It was, in other words, *perfect*. People did not have to plow and cultivate; the earth simply brought forth produce, giving up its fruit willingly.

But with sin came death, and with death came the curse, so that even the ground is cursed. Understanding this helps us to explain how we get from Genesis to the suffering of Job. It explains how we get to the Psalms where there are similar testimonies of pain and sorrow. To be sure, the world declares God's glory. The heavens are telling the glory of God, but they are also telling us another story—one of disorder and entropy, a testimony to the curse.

When humans age and die, therein is the curse. When the ground cracks because there is no rain, there is the curse. When a tornado drops from the sky and lightning strikes, when the floods rise and the hail falls, there is the curse. When hurricanes come, there is curse—and yet there is God as well, for God is in the curse. Of course we cannot know exactly how God is in the curse. We cannot say, “This is why there is drought here and flood there.” Such precision is not given to us, not when the disaster is independent of human action.

Ultimately, we cannot say why God does what He does. We cannot explain why some are spared the ravages of Hurricane Katrina while others must bear her full force. Certainly, it is not because we are better than those who were stricken. Certainly, it is not because we prayed harder than they prayed, or that we did more good deeds than they did. No, it is simply because God was in the wind, as Elihu said to Job.

Thankfully, the story does not end in Genesis chapter 3. In Romans chapter 8, Paul reminds us that,

*The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, 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. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even*

*we ourselves grown within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. [Romans 8:18-23].*

We are waiting for redemption, and so is the planet. So is the cosmos. On that glorious day when all things are consummated, the earth itself will be redeemed along with God's people.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." Then He said to me, "It is done, I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. [Revelation 21:1-6].*

The great story of the Bible—creation, fall, and redemption—speaks directly to what we saw along the Gulf Coast two years ago, and it also speaks directly to our powerlessness to have done anything to prevent it. In the final analysis, we must point to the fact that Hurricane Katrina, like every other natural disaster, is due to sin—not the sin of the Gulf Coast, not the sin of the people of New Orleans, but *our* sin. Our sin explains in part why the tsunami hit in the Indian Ocean basin. Our sin explains why a volcanic eruption destroyed Pompeii. Our sin helps to explain why Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake in the 18th century. Our sin helps to explain why Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

But thank God that is not the end of the story! For God's purpose is to show His glory in the redemption and adoption of countless sons and daughters when they are revealed on that final day. Then He will create a new heaven and a new earth. Try as they might, human beings cannot reverse the curse that was brought on by their own sin. Only the Lord God can reverse the curse, and He does so in Jesus Christ our Lord. In the meantime, we must pray for those who suffer when disaster strikes. We must give generously. And eventually, we must go and give refuge. In all these actions, we will proclaim God's love to a fallen world—and His glory will be displayed.