

# NATURAL DISASTERS AND GOD'S GOOD CREATION

*Naoki Asano*

## **GOD'S NATURE**

Who is God? What is God? Where is God? Numerous questions arise when one starts to think about God. The answers differ depending on one's faith and culture, and even among people of the same faith one will hear different views. Human beings tend to "create" God in their own image. While it is true that people have their own opinion about God, they generally share a common view about God's nature, namely that God is good. God is what is good. Everything good is from God. God is the source of goodness. Even though in terms of etymology there is no clear link between God and good, in theological terms we can state that everything good is from God.

## **GOD'S CREATION**

Creation set in when God pronounced, "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3), "and God saw that the light was good" (Gen 1:4). God created the sky, water and land. God saw them and commented, "It was good." God created the plants, stars and living creatures, saying, "It was good." And, finally, God created humankind. Then "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). Creation completed.

Humankind was created with special attention and care. "God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them" (Gen 1:27). And "God blessed them" (Gen 1:28). Human beings are unique because of the imbedded image of God and the blessings bestowed upon them that God did not impart on other creatures. It is no wonder that in reference to

human beings God said, “Indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). God was pleased with God’s own work of creation.

It should be noted that God made human beings unique for a particular reason: God wanted to create a partner for Godself. God told the man and woman, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1:28). God commissioned them to care for life on the planet. Human beings were ordered to control all creatures and nature so that they would have life in abundance. In light of having been created in the image of God and with special blessings bestowed upon them, human beings could have observed God’s ordinance and grown plants and bred animals while safeguarding their natural environment on earth, under the sea and in the air. Unfortunately, this is not how it turned out 4.6 billion years later. What went wrong? In view of the planet’s increasingly serious environmental deterioration, what are the implications of the original sin committed by Adam and Eve by eating the fruit of a tree of knowledge of good and evil?

Two key terms in Genesis, “subdue” and “have dominion,” describe more precisely what God expected of human beings. In human terms, both terms can easily be misconstrued since they imply having powerful authority over something or somebody. When discussing issues such as the destruction of nature and the exploitation of natural resources, non-Christian environmentalists sometimes accuse Christians of the biblical interpretation of creation, according to which God let human beings “subdue” and “have dominion” over the creation. Is such a Christian faith to blame for our global problems? If not, is it the Bible that leads to such deterioration? Or, ultimately, is God to blame for letting it happen—God who ordered God’s blessed creatures to “subdue” and “have dominion” over nature? Taking into account that God is eternally good, it would make no sense to blame God for this. Nothing evil comes from the source of goodness.

## **BEFORE AND AFTER THE FALL**

In the following, I shall look at the creation story from a wider perspective. God saw that creation was very good. Creation proved to be perfect. Everything went well. “Subdue” and “have dominion,” the two annoying terms used by God while “handing over” the creation to Adam and Eve, might sound different when we acknowledge that under God’s sovereignty, even subduing and dominion can have a sound connotation. According to the biblical narrative, the Fall of the ancestors of humankind did not only affect their own lives, but also those of the whole of creation, since

creation had been totally committed into their hands. The Fall changed the whole scenario of God’s ongoing creation. Human beings changed the meaning of the two terms and the way in which they were implemented. God’s reign and dominion are thus different from human ones which are always in danger of being corrupted by power.

God freely chose to create the world and let human beings control it. Human beings are also blessed with the freedom to choose. We try to choose what we believe is right using our God-given free will, but unfortunately we very often fail. Human will, even though it is a gift from God, is in bondage to sin as Luther expounded in “On the Bondage of the Will.”<sup>1</sup>

## NATURAL DISASTERS

Natural disaster is one of the most challenging theological issues. It is difficult to deal with because when it actually takes place we cannot help asking why God let the tragedy happen. There is no satisfactory answer to this dilemma and thus to the question of theodicy.

The Book of Job is very often referred to in relationship to questions of theodicy. Job’s friends tried to explain to him why Job had to suffer such calamity in spite of his faithfulness to and righteousness before God. Eliphaz told him, “You have sinned” (Job 35:6); Bildad advised him to repent; and Zophar warned Job that his guilt deserved punishment. No one could comfort his sorrow and agony. Job could not figure out why he had to suffer loss and pain in spite of his faithful life before God. Finally God speaks to him out of the whirlwind, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding” (Job 38:4). The Word of God overwhelmed him with the supreme authority of the Creator and sovereignty of the Almighty. Job answered the Lord, “I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth” (Job 40:4). Job saw God as the ultimate being, before whom he has nothing to say, no need to find reasons why he had to suffer. God was there as ultimate goodness. God’s goodness cannot be measured by human reasoning. Suffering should not be an indicator for how much a human being has merited or sinned. Retributive justice, a conventional view of God’s judgment that regards human suffering as punishment, is denied.

Earthquakes and tsunamis, floods, hurricanes and tornadoes regularly involve people and cause casualties. We call them natural disasters. They are the workings of nature of which we are a part.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “The Bondage of the Will, 1525,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 3–295.

Job's experience shows us ways to look at the calamities and sufferings caused by natural disasters. First and foremost it is not retributive justice that God enforces to punish evil people. They befall anyone at any time, regardless of who we are. Jesus made this very clear when he met the man who was blind from birth and his disciples asked him who had sinned so that this man was born blind. Jesus said, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (Jn 9:3). Let us remember what we have learned from the Book of Job. God revealed Godself and God's works when Job severely suffered. This blind man is another Job in the New Testament. Retributive justice is by no means biblical.

## II MARCH 2011, 2:46 PM

A massive earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale jolted East Japan. It triggered powerful *tsunami* waves that reached heights of up to 40.5 meters and hit the coastal areas of Tohoku (northeastern), Japan. This was the moment that changed the history of Japan. In Tokyo, three hundred kilometers away from the epicenter, big shocks triggered explosions of gas tanks and soil liquefaction, plunging the city into chaos. On 12 and 14 March, two nuclear reactors at Fukushima nuclear power plant exploded and spread radioactive substances over large areas of eastern Japan. The largest earthquake ever to be recorded in Japan left behind numerous casualties and killed 18,000 people.

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Takashi Yoshida, a pastor of a Reformed church serving in the affected area, reported that Jesus' cry resonated among the Christian communities of Tohoku district. They could not help but ask, Why Tohoku? Takashi Yoshida had heard people saying that this was God punishing the greedy Japanese people. His own reply to this was the following: "I thought at this very moment that this is not the punishment to those who were killed, but this is God punishing me since I took the easy cozy life with the economic prosperity that was built upon the hard work of many victims for granted." His response reminds me of Job, when, at the very end, he said to the Lord, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). Having said above that theologically retributive justice does not help us to understand the tragedy and ease the pain of the victims, it still happens that people who have suffered under major (natural) catastrophes, tend to interpret their sufferings this way.

It was Friday when the earthquake occurred, two days after Ash Wednesday in 2011. The following day, there was deadly ash from radiation fallout. When

the nuclear power plant exploded and the radioactive substance leaked into the air of Fukushima, pastor Yoshida thought that this world had changed completely, from the beautiful creation of God’s land to the place of sorrow and pain, where no human beings or any living creatures ought to live. The earthquake needs to be examined from another perspective. The earthquake and tsunami are indeed natural, but we must never forget the fact that the explosion of a nuclear power plant is a human-made disaster. This human-made monster irrevocably damaged the land, left it contaminated and barren, and robbed the local people of their houses and property.

God created us in God’s own image and we hold this image inside ourselves in various ways. One of the facets of such a blessed image of God is human creativity that produces creative works in the fields of the arts, design, music, manufacturing, buildings, cooking and so on. Such human creativity enriches life and makes it joyful. After the Fall of Adam and Eve, however, such human creativity has not always successfully revealed the Creator’s image. It began to “walk” on its own, without knowing where to go, often turning its back on God. Nuclear energy was a product of human creativity, primarily to win World War II.

Immediately after the earthquake, the four Lutheran churches in Japan together set up a rescue program. Japan Evangelical Lutheran Relief (JLER) sent a group of people to carry out relief work. Its ministry is closely related to the victims of the disaster who have suffered spiritual, psychological and physical damage and its mission includes listening and deeply caring for the victims and providing the necessary support so that they may find a future life of hope and joy. In March 2014, the JLER’s three-year program came to an end. Although the program itself has ended, the JELC decided to continue the work, as much as possible focusing on the victims of the Fukushima radioactive emissions and accompanying them by listening to their stories and supporting their daily needs. We know this is not a “once for all” support, but a continuous, long-term support over several decades. In the future, to serve as the church for our suffering neighbors will be another missional challenge. This ministry has become another mission that God has entrusted to us as a part of God’s continuing creative activity.

The Australian theologian Frank Rees experienced the earthquake and tsunami that hit the southern part of Western Samoa on 29 September 2009. Later he wrote a theological reflection on the catastrophe, in which he quoted two historic theologians, Jürgen Moltmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Both have a common theological understanding of God working in the suffering world. Moltmann writes of “the accompanying activity of God”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation. The Gifford Lectures, 1984-1985* (London: SCM Press, 1985).

who also suffers the painful reality of the modern world with the suffering people. God is not only the one who created the whole universe, but also the one who continuously accompanies the suffering people through the new creation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison, “only the suffering God can help.” By quoting from Bonhoeffer, Rees asserts that only God who is actively and lovingly engaged with the suffering world can help us,

God is a full participant in the life of the world. To suffer, here, means to be subject to the choices of others. To suffer means to be able to receive and to accept what others decide, as well as to have one’s own capacity and wishes and purposes.<sup>3</sup>

These two theological statements about God are encouraging and inspiring as we continue to carry out our Christian mission to serve people in need and in pain. Both theologians affirm a suffering God who accompanies people in pain. God accompanies those who strive to serve as well as those who suffer. At the same time, we should note that suffering and pain are not something cursed or that God denies. God accepts and willingly suffers such hardships with us while continuing to create new life despite confusion and darkness, sometimes caused by human creativity. This ministry of connecting and staying close to the affected people is our participation in the *missio Dei*.

## THE IMAGE OF PRAYER

“God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them” (Gen 1:28). According to Genesis, being created in the image of God is something that is only granted to human beings. It presupposes our ability to think about, to remember and to believe in our Creator. This gives human beings the ability to respond to God’s call and to create a relationship with God. The response to God’s call may express itself in witness and prayer. Prayer can thus be seen as indication that human beings are created in God’s image. This image was only granted to human beings. Prayer as the tool for us to communicate and engage with God is consequently something that makes us distinctively human. No other creature is gifted with prayer. We know that some other capabilities characterize human nature such as speaking languages or using tools. But apes are known to be intelligent

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Rees, “God of the tsunami: A theological reflection on the experience of disaster and some implications for how we live in the world,” at [www.ttgst.ac.kr/upload/ttgst\\_resources13/20124-270.pdf](http://www.ttgst.ac.kr/upload/ttgst_resources13/20124-270.pdf)

enough to understand some simple words and to communicate with their breeders. They know how to use sticks to pick bananas from the tree. Speaking languages and using tools do not prove that human beings are exceptionally gifted with God’s image.

Prayer can also mean lamentation; in the Old Testament Psalms we often encounter expressions of lament (Ps 22:1: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—the words Christ cried out on the cross according to Mark 15:34), desperate questions asking God, Why does this happen to me? Most often there are no straightforward and quick answers to these questions, yet bringing them before God may be the beginning of a healing process. And one day we might even receive a response to our lamentation.

Sometimes it might be difficult to bring those questions and laments before God on one’s own. In the aftermath of the horrendous tsunami, some non-Christian families came to visit churches, seeking help. In most cases they came because they had lost someone in their family. One day a pastor received a phone call from a mother who asked him, Where is my son now? Why did it have to be my son? Is it because he did something bad? Tell me pastor, where is he now, heaven or hell? The pastor could not answer anything at first. The conversation lasted for about an hour and towards the end he said to her, “I can pray to God and this is the best I can do for you now. If you don’t mind, may I pray for you and your son?” The request to allow him to pray calmed down her troubled mind. She replied in tears, “Yes, please do. Please pray for us.” It is nothing special that a pastor prays for others. But the pastor later remembered this conversation and said,

I never thought before that prayer was such an effective pastoral caring method. I thought my primary calling for ministry would be to preach and teach the Bible to the congregation. But now I know intercessory pastoral prayer is so powerful for spiritual healing.

Intercessory prayer is not only for pastors who are professionally trained and theologically equipped for such grief counseling. It should not be confined only to pastors—it should be practiced by every Christian whenever people are grieving among us. We are all privileged with the gift of prayer and commissioned to use it for our neighbors. It is God who created God’s image in us. This image was created so that we can connect with our Creator who wants us to use this image through prayer for God’s purpose, for God’s mission.

## QUESTIONS

*Do you think the conventional understanding of theodicy (explanation of why a perfectly good, almighty and all-knowing God permits evil) is meaningful in witnessing God in today's world? If yes, why and how?*

*Besides prayer, are there other ways in which the image of God in human beings is being expressed?*

*Why is important for us as citizens of the earth to maintain God's good creation?*