

# Time to Pause and Think

by Ron Bailey

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*The sermon explores the tension between human reason and faith in understanding God's ways, emphasizing the importance of trust in God's sovereignty and love in the face of suffering.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 18:25, Psalm 14:1, Proverbs 9:10, Jeremiah 12:1, Lamentations 3:17, Luke 13:1, Romans 5:8, Ephesians 1:18, Hebrews 11:3

**Topics:** "Suffering And Pain", "Gods Righteousness"

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## Description

Ron Bailey reflects on the profound questions raised by tragic events like tsunamis and the declaration that 'God is Love' in the Bible. He emphasizes the importance of seeking understanding and revelation from God in the face of suffering and unanswered questions. Bailey highlights the need to trust in God's righteousness and love, even when we cannot comprehend the reasons behind such immense pain and loss.

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## Transcript

"Tsunami toll could top 50,000"; The Times. "God is Love"; the Bible

time to pause and think

I'm going to take a week away from the story of Abraham. I have juxtaposed two stark statements as the heading for this week's devotional meditation. How does the Christian consider these two statements? Do they cancel out each other? Do we make a choice of believing one or the other? If not, in absolute terms, do we close our minds to one or other of these 'facts'? The question uppermost in my mind is 'why did this happen'? At the risk, of you reading no further into this little meditation, I will tell you frankly, I don't know. And I will go further, I don't believe anyone else knows either.

It is not unbelief or backsliding to ask questions. The prophet Jeremiah was to become a witness to the death of his nation. Everything he recognised as God's love gifts would be swept away; the Priesthood and the Temple, the Throne of David, the very nation would be dragged ignominiously into exile. As the horrors begin to unfold Jeremiah lifts up his voice 'Righteous art thou, O LORD, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously? (Jer 12:1 KJV)

It is a wonderful and honest statement. Underneath Jeremiah's acknowledgement of God's nature a question is bubbling. Jeremiah is trying to make sense of what he sees, as no doubt many have and many will in the future. It is a reworking of Abraham's rhetorical question; That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Gen 18:25 KJV)

The legitimacy of the question was recognised by the Lord in Luke's gospel; There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. (Luk 13:1-5 KJV) The word translated 'suppose' here is 'dokeo' to judge or decide. The Lord is asking the question 'how are you thinking about these events?'

The astute will notice that so far we are doing pretty well for questions although answers are a bit short in supply. It is right to ask these questions and very human. We were created with the power of reason, and the need to link cause and effect. Somehow we have always known that every event must have a cause. This is the admission of every child who asks a question beginning with the word 'why'. 'Why' demands that there is a reasonable basis to our universe. Some Christians shrink from such questions; they feel that somehow the question is impertinent. The command to ... love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. (Luk 10:27 KJV) undercuts that escape from reason.

The mind or understanding however needs more than raw data to make its right deductions; it requires revelation. Paul prayed, in the Ephesians' letter, that The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, (Eph 1:18 KJV) The understanding needs 'light' from outside as well as its own inherent deductive powers. In that wonderful chapter about 'faith' in Hebrews we have the statement By faith we understand that the ages were framed by a word of God, so that the things being seen not to have come into being out of the things that appear. (Heb 11:3 MKJV)

This kind of understanding must always begin with faith and faith, according to my own personal definition, is right response to revelation. The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God... (Psa 14:1a KJV). To 'leave God out of the calculation' is the Bible definition of a fool. Conversely The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding. (Pro 9:10 KJV) Abraham and Jeremiah both begin their questions with two basic assumptions; that God is Righteous, and that God is God. In other words God had the power to do what He wills, but what He wills will always be righteous because He Himself is Righteous and He can only act in consistency with His Own character.

Abraham was about to see the destruction of Sodom, Jeremiah was about to see the destruction of Jerusalem, but for both the underlying question is how can God justify this behaviour? The spirit of both these men is identical. Abraham's subsequent conversation was not the bartering of a village market, but the same response as that of Jeremiah. The KJV expresses the scene beautifully; ...let me talk with thee of thy judgments... I heard a man recently who said that he is often angry with God; a chill went through my spirit when I heard the words. The man who gets angry with God is never going to get an answer to the question 'why'? We never get an answer to the question 'why' when we hurl it heavenwards through

clenched teeth. The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way. (Psa 25:9 KJV) We may recall that Moses was described as 'the meekest man in all the earth'; it is written of him He made known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel. (Psa 103:7 KJV) I think it is more than a simple Hebrew parallelism. Some people only every see God's acts; the meekest man saw God's ways.

To be pedantic, we would have to say that all that humans will ever see is the 'outer-skirts' of His ways. This was Job's realisation; The pillars of the heavens tremble and are astonished at His rebuke. He quiets the sea with His power, and by His understanding He shatters the proud. By His Spirit the heavens were beautiful; His hand pierced the fleeing serpent. Lo, these are the edges of His ways; but what a whisper of a word we hear of Him! And the thunder of His power who can understand? (Job 26:11-14 MKJV) Speaking elsewhere of God's ways the psalmist said; Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known. (Psa 77:19 KJV) What a vivid picture that is, especially when we recall that this passage is referring to the Red Sea and the Exodus. 'God's way is in the sea'; unimaginable, unpredictable, unrepeatable, untraceable. Theoretically you could visit this spot today, and find nothing but, in its fleeting moment, God walked here and did things of eternal consequences.

The words of Jesus in Luke's gospel are an abiding warning against an understanding based on joining up the dots by the shortest possible route. The Luke 13 passage is instructive because it deals with both human culpability and natural disaster. In the first Pilate might have been blamed, in the second an earth tremor, but in both cases the Lord refuses to connect the disaster event with individual or group sin. This is important when we consider the 1986 Chernobyl Meltdown, the 2004 Tsunami or the 9/11 WTC implications. I will ask and answer my own question... "Do you suppose that the residents of Belorus and Ukraine, the Indian ocean seacoasts or the United States... were sinners above all... that they suffered such things?" "No, I don't". This may surprise and unsettle some of my friends but I am sure that these words in Luke are to prevent us making such connections. It is impossible to deduce cause from effect just by joining up the dots.

Such a deduction would need revelation as well as information. Some will claim such revelation and quickly defend their opinions, but I have no such revelation and in the absence of plain New Testament teaching cannot submit to these conclusions.

There is another classic portion of scripture where dangerous questions are asked. This time the one asking is Asaph, one of David's chief musicians. His question is to be found in Psalm 73. He is in the middle of the same theological dilemma, and starts again by declaring God to be good, but his own thinking has him on the slide. He has watched the wicked and they are 'getting away with it'; in fact, they are thriving. He wonders whether his own clean walk has just been a waste of time, a sheer vanity. He hasn't spoken these things publicly for fear of offending others, but as he meditates his thinking becomes 'too painful for me'. There is a limit our comprehension of suffering. One of the most wicked men of the last century, Joseph Stalin, once remarked 'One death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic'. There is a truth in this cynical comment. We do not usually mourn more over 18 buried under Siloam's tower than we would over 17 unless the extra one is our own child. Perhaps this is part of God's goodness to us that we cannot perceive what '50000 victims of a Tsunami' really means. We are more likely to shed our tears over the thought of a single person weeping for his son, than of 50000 faces we never saw, being swept away. It is not until Asaph entered the place of God's presence that the slide stopped; we shall find the same.

This is where the greater revelation of the New Testament makes its special contribution. God is not afar off, checking the latest statistics. Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is

forgotten before God? (Luk 12:6 KJV) If you check the 'going rate' with Matthew's gospel you will know that the price was 2 sparrows for a farthing, but the sellers would sometimes have a special offer of five sparrows for 2 farthings. They had 'thrown in' in the fifth sparrow without cost. Even this 'sparrow without a price', added almost as an afterthought or bonus, was not forgotten before God. Matthew touches the same truth but his phrase almost sounds unfinished, Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. (Mat 10:29 KJV), and different translators have added words to make up the sense, without your Father's consent, without your Father's will, I prefer to leave it as it is; 'without your Father'. He was not far off checking statistics; He was there, when the sparrow fell. God's capacity for sorrow is infinite.

In each one of those private tragedies which make up the 50,000 He was there too. He felt each pain and panic. He feels now the wounds of each bereaved loved one. He feels the pain of the coming years. I recall an old lady who used to be part of our church. I knew her in the 1980s. On her mantel piece in her home she had a faded photograph of her younger brother. On his birthday, each year, she would weep. "He died", she would say, "on his 19th birthday, at the Somme". Over 60 years and the wounds were not healed. God's wounds have not healed either. The pain that this world has caused and does cause Him is beyond thought or calculation. God's capacity for sorrow is infinite.

How can God allow all this pain? I don't know but I know He shares it and 'feels' it far more than we ever could. To the sure knowledge of His absolute righteousness, I am able to add the revelation that God is Love. This love with which God still loves His world through all its sorrows was demonstrated once in its fullness; But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:8 NASB) and that anchor holds all my other thoughts secure. There is a pattern, I am sure, that is beyond all human knowing and a day may come when we will see more than just 'the edges of His ways', but in the meantime through tears and pain His people must lift their hearts as did Jeremiah all those years ago.

My soul has been rejected from peace; I have forgotten happiness. So I say, My strength has perished, And so has my hope from the LORD. Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. Surely my soul remembers And is bowed down within me.

This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, says my soul, Therefore I have hope in Him. (Lam 3:17-24 NASB)

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