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Christian perspectives on disasters

Tearfund is a faith-based agency committed to working in and through groups of local Christians, where such groups exist. In most cases, these groups are churches within larger communities which share the same disaster risks. Unlike external agencies, the church is part of the affected community when a hazard strikes, and has a role in immediately helping that community to cope with and recover from the disaster. Its long-term presence also creates opportunities for it to engage in measures to prepare for disaster or reduce hazard impact. Through its partners, Tearfund seeks to build the capacity of local churches, to make them more effective in disaster-prone areas.

Recognising that many readers will approach this topic from a Christian perspective, this section considers what the Bible says about disasters and specifically how Christians can respond to them. The text is not intended as a full study on the theology of disasters, as scholars hold differing (and sometimes complex) views. It is offered simply as an introduction to the topic and to stimulate further thinking.

1.1 Understanding disasters

The Bible records many disasters of various types. Sometimes it gives us an explanation of why they happened, and sometimes it does not. In this section, we look at a few examples of Bible passages which include disaster.

Disaster as a consequence of broken relationships

Many disasters mentioned in the Bible do not appear to have happened for a specific reason. They occurred as a result of the geology, weather patterns and natural forces at work in the created world, although these may have changed since the earlier days of the Old Testament.

In Genesis 1, we read that God created a good world, but as a result of human disobedience it did not remain in a perfect state. In Genesis 3 we see that people of that era turned their backs on God and chose to live their own way. The relationships between people and God, between different people and between people and creation were all broken.

Disasters are often made worse by human behaviour. People have become more vulnerable as a result of their own actions and those of other people: inequality, injustice, selfishness and greed all increase the human suffering which results from natural events.

Christians can be affected by disasters as much as anyone else. Christians get sick and die, they may be robbed and raped, they experience accidents and they or their loved ones may be killed by natural hazards. Christians have the hope of the kingdom of heaven, where there will be no more death or suffering, but until that time they live in the world and therefore suffer

the consequences of human disobedience along with the rest of creation. This does not mean a passive acceptance of suffering as unavoidable: Christians can and should speak out for a more responsible attitude to creation, and for changes to the injustices and inequities which contribute to disaster.

Disasters for specific reasons

The Bible gives some examples of disasters that happen for a specific reason, where the timing, location and intensity of natural events appear to be divinely controlled. For example, the flood in Genesis 6-8 is described as a direct and universal judgment on human beings because of their persistent and deliberate disregard of God's moral codes. After the flood, God promised not to bring such a universal disaster on the whole of creation again. This does not mean the end of natural disasters, but it does indicate that they will be more limited in their impact.

Deuteronomy 28:15-68 is one example of God warning his people of disastrous consequences if they continue in disobedience. Drought, disease, dust storms and military defeat will come upon the Israelites if they continue to turn away from their God. In the book of Jonah we read that God did not destroy the city of Nineveh, because after hearing Jonah's prophecy the people showed remorse and abandoned evil practices.

The Bible tells us that disasters will continue until the time when Jesus comes to this earth again, a mission which will bring full restoration of relationships between people, God and the environment. In Matthew 24:4-8 (see also Mark 13:5-8, Luke 21:8-11) Jesus says that famines, earthquakes and war will characterise the time between his first and second coming.

1.2 Human influences on disasters

Although we often use the term 'natural' to describe disasters, there are many human factors that contribute to them. For example, a flood may be seen as a natural occurrence, but its severity may be increased by deforestation in upstream areas. The world was created as a place where humans could live in balance with the earth, but the irresponsible exploitation of its natural resources can disturb this balance and upset delicate natural systems.

As indicated above, injustice in our societies means that poor people suffer much more than rich people from the same hazard. For example, in countries with a strong class system, the richer landowning classes may prevent poor people from gaining access to high land during floods. Rich people are also better able to protect themselves from hazards and have more coping mechanisms to enable them to recover quickly. In contrast, poorer people have fewer resources and less resilience.

The story of Ruth in the Old Testament is an example of how a rich man, Boaz, provides for the poorer people in the community by not being too greedy or selfish with his land. He allows the landless people, including Ruth, to glean the leftover barley from the fields after his workers have gathered the harvest (Ruth 2:2-18). This was common practice in that time, to ensure that those without land still had a harvest to gather, so that they could have food to eat (see Leviticus 19:9-10).

1.3 Christians as God's stewards of creation

In the book of Genesis, we learn that God gives humans the job of ruling over creation (Genesis 1:28-30) and later puts Adam in the Garden of Eden 'to work it and take care of it' (Genesis 2:15). We are responsible for the creation that God has given us, so we must not waste it or exploit it to destruction. In the Old Testament, God gives instructions to his people to ensure that they look after the land. For example, every seven years the land was not to be planted (Leviticus 25:3-5), which would have protected its productivity in the long term. Sadly, human greed and selfishness means we are often more concerned about increasing our own wealth than with caring for creation.

Loving our neighbour also involves caring for creation, as the impact of irresponsible exploitation of the earth's natural resources often has serious consequences for our poorest neighbours. For example, the pollution produced mainly by industrialised countries is causing changes to the earth's climate – changes which have a more severe impact on countries with a higher level of poverty. As the seasons become more unpredictable and rains more unreliable, it will become more difficult for farmers to grow crops. Christians have a duty to examine their own lifestyle and to minimise the negative consequences it may have for others.

1.4 A Christian response to disasters

When disaster happens, it can be difficult to see things from God's perspective. We may not be able to identify why the disaster has happened, but we should always be ready to respond with love and compassion. For example, we should:

- trust that God is still a God of love and compassion, that he experiences sorrow for disaster victims and that he has power to bring good out of bad situations. Our attitude to disaster may influence our survival (see Bible study 1).
- find ways to help those affected by the disaster, using the gifts and skills God has given us (see Bible studies 2, 3 and 6).
- explore opportunities to reduce unnecessary suffering in the future. Often there is little we can do to stop hazards, but we can increase people's preparedness and capacity to cope with them (see Bible study 5). This may involve challenging unequal or broken relationships and upholding biblical values of compassion, equity and justice (see Bible study 4).
- look at ourselves and assess our own relationship with God and the environment. We should look carefully at how we as individuals, our churches or our nations may have contributed in some way to this disaster, for example, by causing environmental damage (see Section 1.3), and seek to avoid similar mistakes in the future.

The church is well placed both to respond with compassion and practical help in times of disaster and to take action to reduce people's vulnerability to hazards. This is because the church exists at grassroots level and its members have a wide variety of skills and resources. Christian relief agencies should work closely with the local church, because the local church can sustain the work when the relief agency moves on.⁵

⁵ Crooks B, Mouradian J (2011) *Disasters and the local church*; Bulmer A, Hansford R (2009) *The local church and its engagement with disasters*

BIBLE STUDY 1

Joy in the face of disasters

We may have no control over many types of so-called 'natural' hazards, but we can control our response to those events. Habakkuk 1 and 2 describe a conversation between the prophet and God about the future of the nation of Judah.

■ **Read Habakkuk 3:1-2**

- *What do we learn about God's character?*
- *How should this inform the way we pray in difficult situations?*

■ **Read Habakkuk 3:16-18**

- *What is Habakkuk's reaction to the approaching disaster?*

- *Why is Habakkuk fearful?*
- *Yet why does he 'wait patiently'?*
- *What does it mean to 'rejoice in the Lord'? What is the relationship between this and God's power as displayed in verses 3-15?*
- *How do we relate to Habakkuk's positive view in difficult times?*
- *What can we learn from this passage?*
- *Do we find it easy to 'rejoice in the Lord' and rely on him during difficult times? How can we encourage each other to do so?*

BIBLE STUDY 2

Serving our communities

■ Christians are called by God to serve and bless those around them. Look at the following Bible passages:

Mark 6:35-44 **Acts 2:42-47**
Luke 10:25-38 **James 2:14-17**
John 13:1-17 **1 John 3:16-18**

- *What are Christians called to do in their communities?*
- *Why are they called to do these things?*

- *What activities might this involve in relation to disasters?*
- *What is the correct way for people to treat God's creation? – for clues, see **Genesis 2:15, Exodus 23:10-11 and Psalm 24:1.***
- Look at **Mark 12:28-31; 1 John 4:10-21 and Matthew 5:43-45**
- *How does the Christian motivation to help those in need differ from the motivation of secular humanitarian agencies?*

BIBLE STUDY 3

The church in Antioch takes action

■ **Read Acts 11:27-30.** A famine was predicted by prophecy, and the church in Antioch decided to provide help for the Christians in Judea.

- *How did the church respond to the famine?*

- *What can we learn from the Antioch church's example of the famine relief it provided?*
- *Is there anything we can do now to prepare for any future disasters here or elsewhere?*

BIBLE STUDY 4

God of justice and mercy

■ **Read Micah 6:1-8.** The writer speculates on how God is to be pleased and considers the value of burnt offerings and sacrifices. The reply is simple and clear – that God’s basic requirement is none of these things. Instead of sacrifice, God requires his people to act with justice, mercy and humility. Verse 8 says:

*He has shown all you people what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

This verse motivates us to show compassion after a disaster has happened and to make efforts to stop disasters happening by pursuing justice.

Disasters are often made worse by greed, inequality and exploitation. Christians can start advocacy projects which challenge these unjust relationships and make people less vulnerable to hazards.

Questions

- *What issues of injustice contribute to people’s sufferings in times of disaster in your area?*
- *What advocacy initiatives could be developed to help bring greater justice?*
- *God calls us to show compassion for those who are suffering. We should be merciful towards people regardless of their ethnicity, religion, sex, age or ability, remembering that all people are equally valuable to God.*

BIBLE STUDY 5

Noah – lessons in preparedness

■ **Genesis 6:5-8:22.** The story of an extensive flood is found in the Bible and in other religious and cultural traditions. According to Genesis, 40 days of rain flooded the land to a depth of seven metres. The flood lasted for 150 days. The human population and land animals were all destroyed, except for those with Noah in his boat.

■ **Read Genesis 6:5-7.** The Bible describes the flood as God’s punishment of bad human behaviour.

- *Do people today sometimes hold this view of disasters?*
- *Taking account of other Bible teaching, is there any justification for this view?*

■ **Read Genesis 6:11-17.** Noah was warned by God that a flood was going to happen. God also gave Noah precise instructions about building a large, waterproof boat, described as an ark.

- *What warnings do we get that disaster is coming?*
- *What traditional knowledge or signs do people use to predict disaster?*



■ **Read Genesis 6:18-22 and 7:1-4.** God gave other instructions to Noah about the birds and animals and food for them.

- *How did this prepare for the period after the floods had gone down?*
- *What are the things we most need to keep safe during times of disaster?*

■ **Read Genesis 8:3-5 and 8:13-19.** When the flood water went down, the ark rested on a hill and Noah and his family were able to make a fresh start, living on higher land.

- *What opportunities do disasters bring for a fresh start and reduced risks?*

BIBLE STUDY 6

Joseph – the right person in the right place

In ancient Egypt, God gave the king a dream about the future. Joseph, a Hebrew prisoner at that time, was called to explain the meaning of the dream. He explained that there would be seven years of good harvest followed by seven years of crop failure. The king was impressed by the wisdom God had given Joseph and appointed him as 'Prime Minister' to save Egypt from starvation.

- **Read Genesis 41:25-32.** God warned the Egyptians about the approaching famine through dreams.
 - *What warnings do we receive about approaching drought?*
- **Read Genesis 41:33-36 and 46-49.** Joseph developed a strategy to help the country survive during the seven years of bad harvest.

- *What were the main features of his famine preparedness plan?*
- *How can people today prepare for times of drought?*
- **Read Genesis 39:2-6 and 21-23.** Joseph had displayed good character earlier in life, when in charge of Potiphar's household and when unjustly held in prison.
 - *What particular qualities, found in Joseph, made him an ideal person to lead the country's famine prevention programme?*
 - *What makes a good leader today in times of disaster?*
- **Read Genesis 50:19-21.** Joseph's wider family came to Egypt for food when the famine affected their homeland.
 - *How did God use Joseph to fulfil his bigger plans?*

REFLECTION

Disasters often raise questions about God and the meaning of life. People ask questions such as 'Why has this happened?', 'Is God punishing us?', 'Is there a loving God?' and 'How can God deliver us from this suffering?'

God often uses such events in people's lives to change hearts, minds and lives. They are also opportunities for Christians to show God's love by providing spiritual, social, psychological and physical support (John 9:1-5 and 35-38).

- Should disasters change the way we carry out our work? Why?
- How can we avoid taking advantage of people's vulnerability?
- Should we hide the fact that we are Christians when we are distributing aid?

AID FOR ALL

The Red Cross Code of Conduct⁶ says that aid should be provided for everyone according to need, irrespective of their ethnic identity, political or religious views.

- How can Christian agencies and churches comply with this code, given a natural tendency to prioritise aid to fellow believers? (Matthew 5:43-48, Romans 12:20, Galatians 6:10.)
- Is this consistent with a Christian approach?

Sharing scarce resources with others across religious, social or ethnic barriers can do much to improve relationships between different groups. Acts of kindness are rarely forgotten.

6 Full title: The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief