

AFTER THE HURRICANE

A Biblical Response To Calamity

By Ajith Fernando

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This booklet was originally written a few days after the tsunami waves struck Sri Lanka in December 2004, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of people and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of others. Ajith Fernando, national director of Sri Lanka Youth For Christ, wrote that original booklet out of the overwhelming suffering the tsunami brought to his friends and countrymen. The challenges and encouragement he offered were so pertinent to the struggles following hurricanes Katrina and Rita that this booklet has been revised to respond to the catastrophes in the Gulf Coast of the United States.

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AFTER THE CALAMITY

When cities, or even nations, experience calamity, Christians must look to the Bible for strength and guidance and reach out with the love of Christ to people who are suffering. This

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booklet is the result of my effort to reflect biblically on what followers of Christ should be doing after disasters like the tsunami in Sri Lanka and the recent hurricanes Katrina and Rita. It is my desire that this would minister to anyone facing a deep crisis.

A TIME TO MOURN

The Bible says that there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Eccl. 3:4). The time in the wake of disaster is certainly a time to weep and mourn.

There are important sections in the Bible called laments where God’s faithful people grieve over what they are experiencing and ask God why He allowed such a thing to happen to them. Some of the laments are by individuals who have suffered. Others are by people who love their nation and mourn over its suffering. There is an entire book of the Bible, Lamentations, devoted to mourning for the sufferings of a nation.

Jeremiah cried, “Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” (Jer. 9:1). He wanted to weep because of the pain in his soul. Jeremiah’s words following that statement show that the weeping would help bring healing to his soul.

As we struggle with pain over our family, community, or nation, expressing our sorrow will help release the pressure and make us more useful to those around us.

This is what happened to Nehemiah. When he heard about the sorry state that Jerusalem was in, he wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed for days until the king noticed that his face showed the signs of

deep sorrow. But after the period of mourning was over, he got down to action and became a national hero whose brilliant leadership style is a great example and is still used almost 2,500 years later.

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In the Bible, we find several ways that people express their mourning, like fasting (2 Sam. 1:12) and putting on sackcloth

(Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 3:31) and ashes (Est. 4:1-3; Jer. 6:26; 25:34). We need to find ways to express mourning that fit our own culture.

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Certainly fasting and praying for a family, church, community, or nation is most desired in times of tragedy. In Sri Lanka after the tsunami, people hoisted white flags as a sign of mourning. Every culture has its own distinct expressions of sorrow.

When Dorcas died and Peter went to her house, “All the widows stood by him weeping,

showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them” (Acts 9:39). This type of scene is very common in Scripture.

We need to think seriously about how we can bring culturally appropriate expressions of mourning into our churches that are in line with the biblical understanding of lament.

A TIME TO ASK WHY GRAPPLING WITH GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY

Asking why a terrible thing happened is one aspect of a biblical lament. The Bible encourages us to grapple with this question by giving examples of great saints who did this, like Job, Jeremiah, and the

psalmists. Job struggled a long time to make sense of what was happening around him. Usually at the end of a time of grappling, God's people affirm that because God is sovereign and knows what is happening, the wisest thing is to keep trusting Him. We see this often in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 73).

Believing in God's sovereignty at a time of tragedy helps us to avoid hopelessness amid the struggle. We must rely on God's promise that even out of terrible tragedy He will bring something good to those who love Him (Rom. 8:28).

This perspective of God's sovereignty may not come right away. Sometimes it's necessary for us to wrestle with God over this. Prayer and meditation on His Word really help at such

times (Ps. 27). We may be busy recovering from the disaster or serving those who have been adversely affected by it. But we must find time to spend with God and His Word. This is why God's

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people must always continue worshiping Him in community, regardless of how serious the situation may be. When we worship together, we focus on those eternal realities that remind us of God's sovereignty.

The exposure to these truths helps drive away the gloom that engulfs us and gives us the strength to trust God to look after us. Having been comforted by God and His Word, we then have the strength to launch into sacrificially serving others who are suffering.

GROANING WITH CREATION

We must remember that when Adam and Eve sinned against God, sin entered the world and the universe lost its equilibrium. The Bible pictures creation as being under a curse (Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:20). Therefore, natural disasters will continue to happen until God brings into being a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). Paul said “that the whole creation groans and labors with birth

pangs together until now” (Rom. 8:22). He then said that those who know Christ also join in this groaning (v.23). During the aftereffects of events like the tsunami and hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we have clearly seen the groaning of creation and of God’s people.

Christians must learn how to groan. If we don’t, when problems arise in the place where God has called us to serve, we may be tempted to run away from God’s will and go to a safer place. Groaning helps us to cope with difficult circumstances.

The groaning that is talked about in Romans 8 is described as the pains of childbirth (v.22). Women who experience excruciating labor pains are able to endure it because they are looking forward to the glorious

moment when they give birth to a child.

Similarly, our groans remind us of the glorious end that is surely coming (see 2 Cor. 5:2-4). This helps us not to run away from the tough situations in which God puts us. We can endure suffering because we know that permanent, eternal deliverance in heaven will surely come.

Groaning also takes away the bitterness we have over the pain we have experienced. We must learn to groan in the presence of God and His people and not bottle it up inside. When we do that, we give expression to our pain and we release the pressure that has built up over our painful experience. Then it will be difficult for bitterness to grow.

Our groaning also allows God to comfort

us, either personally or through our friends.

We must learn to groan in the presence of God and His people and not bottle it up inside.

When we are truly comforted we can't be bitter, because we experience a love that drives away the anger that is at the heart of bitterness.

So as the nation groans over Katrina and Rita, we also groan individually. Part of our groaning would be asking God why such a thing happened, even though deep down we have the confidence that God is in control of His world.

A GOD WHO GROANS

One of the most amazing biblical teachings about God is that when we groan, He groans with us (Rom. 8:26). God knows what we're going through, and He feels our pain. The Bible says that when Israel was distressed, God was also distressed (Isa. 63:9). In fact, He laments and mourns for people who do not even acknowledge Him (Isa. 16:11; Jer. 48:31). That's so different from the common idea that God is distant and uninvolved.

God's groaning should not surprise us, for we find that when Jesus (who is God) lived on earth, He also groaned over the pain of this world. He wept over Jerusalem because of their stubbornness and the punishment that was to come (Lk. 19:41-44).

He also wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus as He joined with the others who were weeping there (Jn. 11:33-35). We can therefore conclude that God is weeping with those who are weeping over the losses from the tsunami and hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

When we realize that God groans with us, it will be difficult to be angry with Him over what has happened to us.

God's weeping gives us a strong reason not to be reluctant to weep. But more important, when we realize that God groans with us, it will be difficult to be angry with Him

over what has happened to us. This also makes it easier for us to go to Him for comfort when we are perplexed.

IS THIS A JUDGMENT?

One question that is often asked is whether calamities such as the tsunami or recent Gulf Coast hurricanes are a judgment from God. Some people even assert that these are acts of God against sinful people. But serious doubt is placed on the reliability of such a claim when we realize that thousands of wonderful Christians were impacted along with everyone else in the affected nations.

When Jesus came into the world, He experienced the same kind of suffering that everyone else did. That was a key aspect of His

identification with humanity. In the same way, those of us who follow Jesus are also called to suffer along with people in distress. Recovering from a disaster gives all of us an opportunity to do just that. It's our privilege as Christians to be among those who have suffered a devastating calamity. We are to be united with them in their grief.

The comments Jesus made about two disasters that took place in His day are very helpful to consider. He had just been speaking about judgment, and some people reminded Him of an incident in which some Galileans were killed by Pilate while they were in the act of making their sacrifice. Perhaps they were mentioning this tragedy as an example

of God's judgment. Jesus did not go along with their reasoning. Instead He said, "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3).

Then Jesus went on to cite another tragedy in which a tower fell and 18 people were killed. Again He said that unless they repented they would "all likewise perish" (v.5). The repetition of the same warning in verses 3 and 5 adds to the urgency of the warning.

Jesus' point was that tragedies should be warnings to us that unless we repent we will face more serious consequences. In the same way, events like the tsunami and recent hurricanes give all of us an urgent warning. They should sober us and remind us how vulnerable we all

are. Are we ready for death and the judgment that follows? These events should lead us to bow in humble submission to the God who is over all, even over nature.

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We must keep in mind that most of the statements about judgment in the Bible are directed to the people of God. Only a few are to those outside of God's covenant community. We know that people will be judged for their rebellion against God. And we

must do all we can to show them how they can be saved from that judgment. But it would be dangerous for us to say that a particular event is a judgment of God.

Jeremiah prophesied that the Jews would be punished for their rebellion against God. And they persecuted him for that. But when they *were* punished, he did not gleefully say, "I told you so!" He mourned for his people (Jer. 9:1). Actually, even before the judgment, he knew that he would be overwhelmed by sorrow if they did not repent. He said, "If you will not hear it, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive" (Jer. 13:17).

We should follow Jeremiah's example by doing all we can to prepare people to stand before their Maker at the coming judgment.

In the wake of a disaster like Katrina, people might be tempted to fix blame on someone. They ask questions like: Didn't officials at all levels of government know about the possible devastating effects of a Category 4 or 5 hurricane on New Orleans? Why wasn't something done years ago? And why did it take so long for those affected by the hurricane to get potentially life-saving assistance?

While it might take years to get answers to these questions and others like them, may we, as the people of God, not be guilty of neglecting to warn people everywhere of the coming judgment

of God. And may we sense the immediacy of their physical and spiritual crisis and rush to give them the assistance they need to alleviate their suffering.

A TIME TO WORK

For Christians, every disaster is a call to action. And because we are strengthened by God's love (2 Cor. 5:14) and empowered by His Spirit (Acts 1:8), we are uniquely equipped to have a huge impact on suffering people.

When there is a calamity, Christians should immediately get to work. When first-century Christians knew of needs within their community, they immediately got busy meeting those needs (Acts 4:34-37).

When the young church in Antioch heard about a famine in Jerusalem, they immediately went about seeking some way to help (11:28-30). In keeping with this practice, Christians throughout history have been in the forefront of relief operations.

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I believe Paul's exhortation in 2 Timothy 2 about Christian service is appropriate to consider whenever we find ourselves in an extreme situation of need. Let's take a look at this passage and apply

it to our own situation.

Paul wrote, “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (v.3 ESV). He described Timothy’s service as suffering. This statement from Paul shouldn’t surprise us, because suffering for the gospel was a normal part of his everyday life (see 1 Cor. 15:30-31; Col. 1:24-29). This is the call to all Christians who are living in the midst of suffering—a call to suffer by serving their nation.

Faithful Christians suffer in different ways as they seek to serve God and their nation. Sometimes the suffering is subtle. For example, a wife may need to release her husband to work extra hard at relief operations. This is usually a strain on the marriage and family, and it may also result in an

extra burden for her.

But when we realize that our suffering is being done for God, it will help reduce the pain and take away the resentment.

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Other ways of suffering are more overt—like fatigue, lack of sleep, and facing criticism about our motives and about the way we do our service.

In the verses that follow verse 3, Paul explained how Timothy should take on his share of suffering. He said, “No soldier gets entangled in

civilian pursuits” (2 Tim. 2:4 ESV). We may have to give up what others view as normal needs in order to serve other people at this time. Extreme situations call for extreme solutions. Our families must be told that we all will have to pay a price if we are going to minister to our nation during a crisis.

Of course, family life is important. Nurturing our families is something that can never be taken off the front burner. But the immediate crisis may cause us to change the way we do things.

According to Paul, another aspect of suffering is working hard like a farmer (2 Tim. 2:6). Elsewhere he said, “To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily” (Col. 1:29).

Considering the urgency of our call to share Christ with a dying world, we always need to be working hard at serving God while we live on earth. One day we will have a grand rest when we get to heaven (Rev. 14:13). But now is the time to work.

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Amy Carmichael

Amy Carmichael, the great missionary to abandoned children in India, said, “We have all eternity to celebrate our victories, but only a few

hours before sunset to win them.”

This is a time for us to suffer for people who are in desperate need, to work hard, and to give up some things we are used to having so that those who have nothing can be helped. Not to help would be a serious error. The prophet Amos pronounced woe to those who were living at ease and having fun while their nation was in a crisis (Amos 6:1-6). Because David stayed home at a time when kings usually went out to war, he fell into sin (2 Sam. 11:1).

In verses 8-13 of 2 Timothy 2, Paul told Timothy about the blessings that would come if he suffered in the service of God. Look at verses 11 and 12: “If we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If

we endure, we shall also reign with Him.” But there’s also a warning:

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“If we deny Him,
He also will deny us.
If we are faithless, He
remains faithful; He
cannot deny Himself”
(2 Tim. 2:12-13).

These verses remind us that the coming judgment is an awesome reality. There is reward for

service but punishment for disobedience. That truth is part of the Christian approach to life that influences everything we do.

One day we will see that all the personal sacrifices we made were worthwhile. This is why we shouldn't be upset when others get the credit for what we do. This is why we should be willing to do things

Disasters are opportunities to show Christian love.

that don't seem to bring us any earthly reward. No work is too small for us, for God will give us the strength to be His servants. Disasters are opportunities to show Christian love.

A TIME TO PRAY

The most powerful work a Christian can do is pray. According to Paul, effective intercessory prayer is hard work (Col. 4:12-13). In Old Testament times when the nation faced a crisis, godly leaders called the nation to prayer, often with fasting. Fasting took place in times of national calamities (2 Sam. 1:12). When a great multitude of foreign invaders came against King Jehoshaphat, he was afraid. But his immediate response was to "set himself to seek the Lord, and [proclaim] a fast throughout all Judah" (2 Chr. 20:3). We would have expected him to rally his army and prepare them for war.

Instead he proclaimed a fast and gathered the nation to pray. The result was that God intervened and gave him a resounding victory.

However busy we are, individual and corporate prayer should be an important aspect of our relief operations.

However busy we are, individual and corporate prayer should be an important aspect of our relief operations. And the beauty of prayer is that this is something that every Christian can do—young and old, physically active and those confined to bed. When there are national

or local crises, Christian leaders should call their people to special times of prayer and fasting.

Here are some things that we should be praying about:

- for God's grace to go to those who have suffered loss of loved ones and property;
- that those who are deeply traumatized would be ministered to, and that those who are displaced from their homes would find a solution to their housing problems;
- that those who are in shelters would be adequately provided for, and that those who are vulnerable to attack, like women and children, would be protected;
- that Christians would rise up and be sacrificially involved in effective service;

- that the church would be revived to bring glory to God through our actions and our witness for Christ;
- that God would guide each of us about how we can be involved in the process of healing;

The most powerful work a Christian can do is pray.

- for the process of relief and rehabilitation and for the groups involved in this process (especially Christian organizations and churches), and for the government authorities who are responsible for allocating funds to the affected areas;

- that corruption, waste, a lack of planning, and anything else that could hamper relief operations would be minimized;
- for wisdom for our political leaders who make policies that affect the healing process;
- that there would be adequate supplies and funding for the huge task of restoring the affected areas;
- that through this tragedy, the world would see the love of Christ displayed through His followers to people in need;
- that God's glory would shine through to the nation as never before, resulting in people seeking God and finding His salvation.

A TIME TO GIVE

When Agabus prophesied to the church in Antioch that a famine was coming to Jerusalem, this young church immediately took an offering and sent it to Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30). Later, Paul organized a fund to raise money from several churches outside Israel to help meet the needs of the Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 8-9). Giving to the needy is an important aspect of Christianity (Dt. 15:7-11; Mt. 5:42; 19:21; Lk. 12:33; Gal. 2:10; 1 Tim. 6:18; Heb. 13:16).

During times of calamity, the people of God must give of their possessions to help those who have suffered. Paul said that we have a special responsibility

toward those of “the household of faith,” toward the members of our spiritual family (Gal. 6:10). So our first

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responsibility is to our brothers and sisters in Christ. But our giving must go beyond that to others who are needy. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, a command that appears seven times in the New Testament (Mt. 19:19; 22:39; Mk. 12:31; Lk. 10:27; Rom 13:9; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8).

As large sums of

money and supplies are coming from government and relief organizations, we might mistakenly conclude that we ourselves do not need to give because our gifts will be small in comparison. But we must remember that the power of a gift does not depend on the

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amount of money given. Jesus' story of the widow's mite teaches this. Although the widow gave only a small amount of money to the temple offering, Jesus said, "Assuredly,

I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury" (Mk. 12:43).

Christian leaders need to encourage their congregations to give, teaching them that even their small gifts could have great power when God works through them. We need to give specific instructions on how, where, and when people can give.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he took considerable space appealing to them to give to the Jerusalem fund (2 Cor. 8-9). He also presented some clear plans about how the offerings could be made and how the fund was going to be administered (1 Cor. 16:1-4).

A TIME TO PLAN

First Corinthians 16:1-4 shows that the taking in and the disbursement of gifts should not be haphazard. This principle also applies to the relief and rehabilitation process. Proverbs says that wars need to be waged with proper plans and advice so that the wisest strategies are adopted (Prov. 20:18; 24:6). This applies to the “war” on the needs of people. Much time, energy, and resources can be wasted because of a lack of planning. Many needy people could miss the aid they should get and some could get more than they need—all because of poor planning.

Planning is especially needed when we move

from meeting emergency needs to beginning the reconstruction process.

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It's wise for smaller groups to partner with others. When we join with other churches and groups, we have a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate the unity we share in Christ.

Churches are often gifted with willing and able people. That could be an important resource to give to specialist groups who have the funds and the expertise for relief and

rehabilitation but do not have enough people. This is one of those situations in which the principle of Ecclesiastes 4:9 applies: “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor.” Most of us are not equipped or knowledgeable enough to do the most effective job on our own. So it’s wise for us to partner with others.

This may also be a time for us to show our commitment to those in need by helping other groups who are not connected with the church. We are citizens of two worlds. So everything we do in both worlds we do for God and for His glory (1 Cor. 10:31). The jobs we do in so-called “secular” institutions we are to do primarily for God. We can consider

our job important because it goes to serve the community where God has placed us as His witnesses. The same

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principle applies when we serve the community through relief and rehabilitation projects organized by neighborhood groups or the government. We should look for opportunities to join with our neighbors in their projects so that we can represent Christ.

A TIME TO BE CAREFUL

In 2 Timothy 2, where Paul urged Timothy to suffer and work hard, he also urged him to be like an athlete who “competes according to the rules” (v.5). When you are running hard, it’s easy to stumble and fall. Sadly, many who work hard in the relief process break some basic rules that should never be broken. So, when doing relief work, we must be sure to follow the basic principles of Christianity and of Christian service.

For example, in the overwhelming situation we may find ourselves in after a calamity, we may forget to take the time to be alone with God or to be with our spouse and children. But such omissions must not be

allowed to go on for too long.

If we neglect our time with God, we will lose our spiritual health. If we neglect our time with our spouse and family members for too long, we will end up with unhealthy families. If we keep on losing sleep and working without a rest, our bodies and our emotions will be seriously affected, leaving us weak and erratic in our behavior.

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Immediately after an emergency, we may have to push ourselves to the

limit without much rest. But soon we will need to get into a routine of finding time for rest and devotion amid the busy activity. This would include resting one day a week in keeping with the principle of a Sabbath rest. This applies to all people involved in alleviating suffering. For example, those who care fulltime for ailing loved ones must make sure they take time off to rest and to be with the Lord. If they don't, they may become irritable and even lose their effectiveness as caregivers.

Working nonstop without rest and spiritual nourishment will result in a loss of joy, irritability, and even depression. In his book *The New Testament Image Of The Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974, p.133),

W. T. Purkiser quotes someone involved in counseling who said that he has never known a case of depression that didn't begin with fatigue.

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Because joy is one of the most basic qualities of a Spirit-filled Christian (Gal. 5:22), when people lose their joy they cease to behave like Christians. This joy is what gives us strength (Neh. 8:10). It helps us to keep serving God enthusiastically,

regardless of how tough things become. Sometimes we may be weeping from the sorrow of what has happened, but deep down we have the joy of the Lord in our lives. This is because amid the sorrow, we are enjoying fellowship with the One who loves us and whom we deeply love.

One of the sad facts of the history of relief work is that many of its workers have fallen into serious sin and damaged their relationships with their families and loved ones. And many relief workers burn out and never attempt such work again.

This is similar to what we see in families who have a child who is seriously ill. Couples will often divorce after they have come to the end of their prolonged crisis.

They had been so involved with the tough work of caring for the child that they didn't take the time to nurture their marriage relationship. They were working hard together throughout their child's illness, but once the child died they discovered that they had drifted apart.

In emergency situations, be careful to "keep a close watch on yourself" (1 Tim. 4:16 ESV). We tend to get careless when we are tired. We can easily be caught off guard at such times. So we need to be especially careful about our personal lives when we're exhausted.

We also need to be careful about our professional behavior. Paul warned that if we work in ways that are displeasing to God, our work will be considered

useless by God and will be burned away and destroyed at the final

Paul warned that if we work in ways that are displeasing to God, our work will be considered useless by God and will be burned away and destroyed at the final judgment.

judgment (1 Cor. 3:12-15). Here are some professional errors we need to be careful about.

- We must take care that we do not exaggerate about what we are doing or use our reporting to bring glory to ourselves. The glory

from what we do belongs to God alone (Ps. 115:1; Isa. 48:11). We need to be constantly alert to the possibility of straying into actions that are aimed primarily at bringing glory to ourselves and our organizations.

- We must also be careful about the way we use the funds we receive. Even though there is a lot of urgent work to do, we must not break the principles of acceptable accounting. Sadly, many frauds have been committed during relief operations. And some of these began as errors in procedures by well-meaning individuals.

A TIME FOR COMFORT AND FOR THE GOD OF COMFORT

Paul described God as the “God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor. 1:3-4). With so many people traumatized, sad, and needing someone to listen to them, those who have received God’s comfort can do much to be agents of healing.

I think society has learned the importance of ministering to people who are emotionally and mentally affected by calamities. Now professional counselors

are rushed to places where disasters have taken place. While this is needed, the experts also realize that there is great value in the friendships of laypeople who are known by the affected persons. These are the people who can minister

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to others in a more natural setting over an extended period of time.

What is most urgent is

to give back to affected people, as much as possible, what they regarded as a normal life before the tragedy struck. One of the most important jobs that the expert can do is get people back into their “normal” relationships with their families, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. It is in those relationships that they will find strength.

Our role in helping traumatized people may simply be one of being with them and listening to them.

Our role in helping traumatized people may simply be one of being with them and listening

to them. But the urgency of getting them back to a normal life may often necessitate talking to them as well. Listening alone may not be enough.

Experts have found that some things that are quite normal in ordinary counseling situations should not be done with people who have gone through severe trauma. For example, it's standard practice in counseling to ask hurting people to talk about their pain and what caused it. But with trauma counseling this should be done only when the person is ready, which may be much later. Talking about the trauma prematurely may trigger emotions that they cannot handle.

Some fairly extreme reactions like intense fear, depression, withdrawal and silence,

anger, sleeplessness, shock, nightmares, and crying are normal human responses to tragedy. In most cases, these symptoms will pass with time. We should therefore try to be understanding and reluctant to come to quick judgments about their behavior. Ministering in this way is patterned after the model of Christ, who left heaven, came alongside us, and understood our lives better than we ourselves do.

Following the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka, my friend Dr. Arul Anketell, who is a medical doctor now ministering fulltime with other people in the medical field, encountered an old man in a refugee camp. He had typical symptoms of a severe heart attack. Arul called another

doctor and upon examination they concluded that he was not suffering from a heart attack

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at all. This man had lost several family members in the tsunami. They talked and prayed with him and soon found that he was not only cleared of his symptoms but was

also deeply interested in getting to know about the God to whom the doctors had prayed.

I know of children who are afraid to touch water since the tsunami. I went to a school where a teacher told me that they would like to reopen soon. But the parents didn't want to send their children to the school because it's fairly close to the sea, and because they don't want to be separated from them—even for the brief time they would be in school. Such situations require much understanding and skill.

Even relief workers were in need of comfort. What they experienced was emotionally draining. When I first went to one of the places that was seriously affected by the tsunami, I wanted to weep

because of the strong impact it had on me. A colleague went to a similar site shortly after the tsunami hit and was confronted with dead bodies and incredible devastation. It wasn't long before he had to go to his van so he could weep privately.

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Exposure to devastation can profoundly affect our minds and emotions. This calls for sensitivity to the

needs of caregivers. They must be given opportunities to share their pain with others and to be exposed to the comfort of the Christian community and to the comfort of God.

I think one of the greatest truths for Christians ministering to wounded people is that when God became a human being, He suffered many of the same things that those who face tragedies suffer. As a child, Jesus narrowly escaped a violent death, and His family had to flee their motherland and be refugees in a strange land. He was rejected by the people He came to help. His earthly father probably died when He was young, and because He had at least four younger brothers and an unknown number of

sisters to be supported (Mk. 6:3), He didn't receive a formal education. This is why the religious authorities regarded Jesus as uneducated (Jn. 7:15). This is a handicap that many children face today if their family encounters tragedy. Jesus knew the pain of being tried and condemned unjustly and executed as a criminal by one of the cruelest methods invented by humankind.

When I was less than 10 years old, something very embarrassing happened to me. In my desperate state, the first words that came to my mind were, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" Much later it struck me that I knew these words because they were spoken by God

incarnate, Jesus Himself (Mt. 27:46). He went through the pain we go through. This truly is a God with whom suffering humanity can identify.

The greatest need of people is to have a relationship with the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3). In our busyness of relief efforts, we must never lose sight of the need people have to receive God’s salvation. We must remember, however, that God never manipulates people into accepting His message. He reasons with people about His way of salvation (Isa. 1:18). We must therefore be careful to ensure that people do not accept Christ simply because they received aid from Christians. They should accept Him because they believe in their hearts and minds that, through

Jesus, God has provided the answer to their deepest needs.

Times of disaster provide us with unique opportunities to practice our Christianity. When a disaster strikes, Christians need to ask, “What should I be thinking at this time? And how should I respond to this crisis in a Christian way?”

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