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## Modern Myths About Satan and Spiritual Warfare

By David Servant

### MYTH #4:

**“Satan, as ‘the god of this world’ has control over everything on the earth, including human governments, natural disasters, and the weather.”**

Satan is spoken of in Scripture as being “the god of this world” by the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 4:4) and “the ruler of this world” by Jesus (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Based upon these titles for Satan, many have assumed that Satan has total control over the earth. Although the previous chapter contains enough scriptures to expose the error of this particular myth, it will do us well to study even further so that we can have a full understanding of just how limited Satan’s power really is.

Before we begin, however, it would be helpful to interject some basic information about interpreting the Bible, because flawed interpretation is the most common reason for false belief.

#### A Foundational Rule

One of the most fundamental rules for interpreting the Bible (or interpreting any other book) is this: *Read contextually*. That is, we must not wrench isolated scriptures from the Bible to formulate our theology, but should read every sentence within the context of its surrounding sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books. Let me offer you an obvious example of a violation of this rule.

I once heard a preacher give a sermon on the Christians’ need to be “baptized in fire.” He began his sermon by reading the words of John the Baptist from Matthew 3:11: “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Based upon this one verse, he built a sermon. I remember him saying, “Just because you are baptized in the Holy Spirit, that is not enough! Jesus also wants to baptize you in fire, just like John the Baptist proclaimed!” He went on to explain that, once we had been “baptized in fire,” we would be full of zeal to work for the Lord. Finally he had an altar call for people who wanted to be baptized in fire.

Unfortunately, that particular preacher had made the classic mistake of taking a scripture out of its context.

What did John the Baptist mean when he said that Jesus would baptize with fire? To find the answer, all we need to do is read the two verses before that verse, and one verse after it. Let's begin with the two preceding verses. There John said:

“And do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and *thrown into the fire*” (Matt. 3:9-10, emphasis added).

We first learn that at least part of John's audience that day consisted of Jews who thought their salvation was based upon their lineage. Thus, John's sermon was evangelistic.

We also learn that John was warning that unsaved people are in danger of being *cast into the fire*. It would seem reasonable to conclude that “the fire” of which John spoke in verse 10 is the same fire of which he spoke in verse 11.

This fact becomes even more clear when we read verse 12:

“And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, *but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire*” (Matt. 3:12, emphasis added).

In both verses 10 and 12, the fire of which John was speaking was the fire of hell. In verse 12, he metaphorically states that Jesus will divide people into two groups—wheat, which He will “gather into the barn,” and chaff, which He will burn up “with unquenchable fire.”

In light of the surrounding verses, John must mean in verse 11 that Jesus will baptize people *either* with the Holy Spirit, if they are believers, or with fire, if they are unbelievers. Since that is the case, no one should be preaching to Christians that they need to be baptized in fire!

Moving beyond the immediate context of these verses, we should also look to the rest of the New Testament. Can we find an example in the book of Acts where Christians are said to have been “baptized in fire”? No. Can we find an exhortation or any instruction in the epistles for Christians to be “baptized in fire”? No. Therefore, it is very safe to conclude that no Christian should be seeking a baptism in fire.

### **Back to “the god of this World”**

I'm sure you see how vital it is that we interpret scriptures contextually. We must be cautious therefore, that our entire understanding of Satan is not built upon only three scriptures that refer to him as god, or ruler, of the world.

As we examine more of Scripture, we discover that not only did Jesus refer to Satan as “ruler of this world,” but He also referred to His heavenly Father as “Lord of heaven *and earth*” (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21, emphasis added). Additionally, not only did the apostle Paul refer to Satan as “the god of this world,” but he, like Jesus, referred to God as “Lord of heaven *and earth*” (Acts 17:24, emphasis added). This proves to us that neither Jesus or Paul would want us to think that Satan has complete control over the earth. Satan's authority must be limited.

A very important distinction between these contrasting scriptures is to be found in the words *world* and *earth*. Although we often use these two words synonymously in the English language, in the original Greek the two are usually not the same. Once we understand how they differ, our understanding of God and Satan's authority on the earth increases dramatically.

Jesus referred to God the Father as Lord of the *earth*. The word translated *earth* is the Greek word *ge*. It refers to the physical planet upon which we live, and from it our word *geography* is derived.

Contrariwise, Jesus said that Satan is the god of this *world*. The Greek word for *world* here is *kosmos*, and it refers primarily to order or arrangement. It speaks of *people* rather than of the physical planet itself. That is why we often speak of Satan as the “god of this world’s *system*.”

Presently, God does not have complete control over the *world*, because He does not have complete control over all the *people* of the world. The reason for this is that He has given all people a choice as to who will be their master, and many have chosen to give their allegiance to Satan. Humanity’s free will, of course, is a part of God’s plan.

Paul used a different word for *world*, the Greek word *aion*, when he wrote of the god of this *world*. *Aion* can and often is translated as *age*, that is, a marked period of time. Satan is the god of this present age.

What does all this mean? The *earth* is the physical planet upon which we live. The *world* speaks of the people who presently live upon the earth, and more specifically, those who are not serving Jesus. They are serving Satan, and are caught up in his perverted, sinful system. We, as Christians, are said to be “in the world” but not “of the world” (John 17:11,14). We live among the citizens of the kingdom of darkness, but we are actually in the kingdom of light, the kingdom of God.

So now we have our answer. To put it simply: God is sovereignly in control of the entire earth. Satan, by God’s permission, only has control of the “world’s system,” which is control over those who are citizens of his dark kingdom. For this reason, the apostle John wrote that the “whole *world* (not the whole *earth*) lies in the power of the evil one” (1 Jn. 5:19).

This is not to say that God has no authority over *the world*, or the world’s *system*, or the people of the world. He is, as Daniel stated, “ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes” (Dan. 4:25). He still can exalt or humble any person He desires. However, as supreme “ruler over the realm of mankind,” He has sovereignly permitted Satan to rule over the portion of mankind that is in rebellion against Him.

### **Satan’s Offer Considered**

This distinction between the earth and the world is also helpful in understanding Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. There Satan showed Jesus “all the kingdoms of the *world* in a moment’s time.” As I explained in the previous chapter, Satan could not have been offering Jesus a political position over earthly human governments, what we might call a president or premier. Satan is *not* the one who exalts and humbles earthly human rulers—God is. (This will be further proven later in this chapter.)

Rather, Satan must have shown Jesus all the sub-kingdoms of his world-wide kingdom of darkness. He showed Jesus the hierarchy of evil spirits who, in their respective territories, reign over the kingdom of darkness, as well as the rebel humans who are their subjects. Satan offered Jesus control over *his* domain—if Jesus would join Satan’s rebellion against God. Jesus would then have become second-in-command over the kingdom of darkness.

This was designed by Satan as a temptation for power; then Jesus would have had control over every principality, power, world force of this darkness, spiritual force of wickedness in the heavenly places (see Eph. 6:12), and every unsaved human. (This is, of course, all predicated upon the assumption that Satan was telling the truth.)

In summary, God has sovereign control and ownership of the earth and the world (see Psalm 24:1), but He has permitted Satan to have authority over “the world”—which consists of evil spirits and rebel human beings. This is what Jesus and Paul meant when they described Satan as the god or ruler of this world. Whether unsaved people realize it or not, their god is Satan. They believe his lies and serve him.

## God's Control Over Earthly, Human Governments

The sacred cow we are trying to shoot in this chapter is the idea that Satan, as “ruler of this world” has control over everything on the earth, including human governments, natural disasters, and the weather. As we have more precisely defined Satan’s title of “god of this world,” however, we can see that Satan does not possess absolute control. Let’s establish even more specifically the limits of Satan’s authority by first examining scriptures that affirm God’s authority over earthly, human governments. Satan has *some* authority in human governments only because he has some authority over unsaved people, and governments are often controlled by unsaved people. But ultimately, God is sovereign over human governments, and Satan can only manipulate them to the degree that God allows.

We have already examined, in the previous chapter, Daniel’s statement to King Nebuchadnezzar, but because it is so illuminating, let us briefly consider it once more.

Great King Nebuchadnezzar was lifted up in pride because of his power and accomplishments, and so God decreed that he would be brought down to a low estate in order that he might learn that “the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes, and sets over it the lowliest of men” (Dan. 4:17). Obviously God deserved the credit for Nebuchadnezzar’s rise to political greatness. This is true of every earthly leader. The apostle Paul, speaking of earthly rulers, declared that “there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God” (Rom. 13:1).

God is the original and supreme authority of the entire universe. If anyone has any authority, it can only be because God delegated some of His or permitted someone to have some.

But what about evil rulers? Did Paul mean that even they are established by God? Yes he did. Earlier in the same letter, Paul wrote, “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth’” (Rom. 9:17). God exalted hard-hearted Pharaoh for the purpose of glorifying Himself. God would show forth His great power though His delivering miracles—an opportunity afforded by a stubborn man whom He exalted.

Is this fact not also apparent in Jesus’ conversation with Pilate? Amazed that Jesus would not answer his questions, Pilate said to Jesus, “You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” (John 19:10).

Jesus replied, “You would have no authority over Me, *unless it had been given you from above*” (John 19:11, emphasis added). Knowing Pilate’s cowardly character, God had exalted him in order that His preordained plan for Jesus to die on the cross would be consummated.

Just a cursory reading of the Old Testament books of history reveals that God sometimes uses evil human rulers as agents of His wrath upon deserving people. Nebuchadnezzar was used by God to bring God’s judgment upon many Old Testament nations.

### God Lifts Up and Brings Down

Consider also these three scriptures:

For not from the east, nor from the west, nor from the desert comes exaltation; but God is the Judge; *He puts down one, and exalts another* (Ps. 75:6-7, emphasis added).

Daniel answered and said, “Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to Him. And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; *He removes kings and establishes kings*; He gives wisdom to wise men, and knowledge to men of understanding” (Dan. 2:20-21, emphasis added).

“He [God] has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. *He has brought down rulers from their thrones*, and has exalted those who were humble” (Luke 1:51-52, emphasis added).

There are numerous examples of rulers whom God exalted or brought down in the Bible. In the New Testament, we read of Herod, who failed to give glory to God when some of his subjects cried out before him, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” (Acts 12:22).

The result? “And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him...and he was eaten by worms and died” (Acts 12:23).

Keep in mind that Herod was definitely a citizen of Satan’s kingdom, but he was not out of God’s jurisdiction. Obviously, God could bring down any present earthly leader if He desired.<sup>1</sup>

### **God’s Personal Testimony**

Finally, let us read what God Himself once said through the prophet Jeremiah in regard to His sovereignty over earthly, human kingdoms.

“Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?” declares the Lord. “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it” (Jer. 18:6-10).

Can you see that there is no way that Satan, when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness, could have been legitimately offering Jesus rule over earthly, human, political kingdoms? If he was telling the truth (as he sometimes does), then all he could have been offering Jesus was control over his kingdom of darkness.

But does Satan have *influence* in human governments? Yes, but only because he is the spiritual lord of unsaved people, and unsaved people are involved in human governments.

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<sup>1</sup> Does this mean that we should not pray for governmental leaders, or vote in elections, knowing that God exalts whoever He wants over us? No, in a democracy, God’s wrath is practically built in. We get whom we vote for, and wicked people usually elect other wicked people. For this reason, the righteous should cast their vote. (And we should realize and thank God that He has allowed us to live under a democratic form of government. That in itself is an indication of His mercy upon us.) Additionally, in both Old and New Testaments, we are instructed to pray for our governmental leaders (Jer. 29:7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4), which indicates that we can influence God as He determines who will be put into office. Because God’s judgment sometimes comes in the form of wicked governmental leaders, and because our nation is presently so deserving of judgment, we can ask for and obtain some mercy from Him, so that our country does not get *everything* it deserves.

Yet he only has as much influence as God permits him to have, and God can foil any of Satan's schemes any time He desires. The apostle John wrote of Jesus as being "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1:5).

### **Does Satan Cause Natural Disasters and Adverse Weather?**

Because Satan is "the god of this world," many have also assumed that he controls the weather and is the one who causes all natural disasters, such as droughts, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes and so on. But is this what Scripture teaches us? Again, we must be careful that we don't base our entire theology of Satan upon one scripture which says that "the thief comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy" (Jn. 10:10). How often I have heard people quote this verse as proof that anything that steals, kills, or destroys is from Satan. When we examine more of the Bible, however, we learn that God Himself sometimes kills and destroys. Consider these three examples out of many possible examples:

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to *destroy*... (James 4:12, emphasis added).

But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who after He has *killed* has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him! (Luke 12:5, emphasis added.)

"And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to *destroy* both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28, emphasis added).

You can see that if we say that *everything* that involves killing or destroying is the work of Satan, we are mistaken. There are scores of examples of God killing and destroying in the Bible.

We should ask ourselves, *When Jesus spoke of the thief who comes to kill, steal, and destroy, was He actually speaking about the devil?* Again, all we need to do is read His statement contextually. One verse prior to His statement about the thief coming to kill, steal, and destroy, Jesus said, "All who came before Me are *thieves* and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them" (Jn. 10:8). When we read Jesus' entire discourse in John 10:1-15 stating He is the good Shepherd, it becomes even more obvious that His terms *thief* and *thieves* are references to false teachers and religious leaders.<sup>2</sup>

### **Various Views of Adverse Weather and Natural Disasters**

When a hurricane or earthquake strikes, it raises a theological question in the minds of people who believe in God: "Who is causing this?" There are only two possibilities for Bible-believing Christians: Either God or Satan causes them.

Some may object: "Oh no! God is not to blame! People are to blame. God is judging them for *their* sins."

I agree whole-heartedly. *If* God is *causing* hurricanes and earthquakes because of His judgment upon sin, then certainly we can lay the *blame* on rebel humans rather than on

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Satan could not be described as a thief or as one who kills, steals, and destroys, or that false teachers are not motivated by Satan, but simply that, when Jesus made His statement about the thief in John 10:10, He was not thinking of Satan or evil spirits—He was thinking of false human teachers.

God, but still, God bears *responsibility*, as the natural disasters would not occur without His decree.

Or, if it is true that God *allows Satan* to send hurricanes and earthquakes to bring His judgment upon sinners, then we could say that *Satan* causes them, but still, God bears responsibility. The reason is because *He* is the one who permitted Satan to cause the destruction and because those disasters occur as a result of *His* reaction to sin.

Some say that neither God nor Satan are responsible for hurricanes and earthquakes, but that they are simply a “natural phenomena in our fallen world of sin.” In a vague way, they are also attempting to lay the blame on humankind for natural disasters, but still missing the point. This explanation does not take God out of the picture. If hurricanes are simply a “natural phenomena in our fallen world of sin,” who decided that they would be? Obviously hurricanes are not *man-made*. That is, hurricanes don’t develop whenever a certain volume of lies are spoken into the atmosphere. Earthquakes don’t occur when a certain number of people commit adultery.

No, if there is a relationship between hurricanes and sin, then God is involved, because hurricanes are a manifestation of His judgment upon sin. Even if they occur randomly, it would have to be God who decreed that they would occur randomly, and thus He is involved.

Even if there is *no* relationship between sin and natural disasters, and God goofed when He designed the world, so that there are faults in the earth’s crust that sometimes shift and weather systems that occasionally go berserk, still God would bear responsibility for earthquakes and hurricanes as He is the Creator, and His mistakes harm people.

### **No, Virginia, There is No “Mother Nature”**

So we have only two possible answers for the question of natural disasters. Either God or Satan is responsible. Before we look at specific scriptures to determine which answer is correct, let’s think further about those two possible answers.

*If Satan* is the one who causes natural disasters, then either God can or cannot stop Satan. If God *can* stop Satan from causing natural disasters but doesn’t, then He again bears some responsibility. The disaster never would have occurred without His permission.

And now on the other side. Let’s assume, for a moment, that God *can’t* stop Satan, but He would like to. Is that really a possibility?

If God can’t stop Satan from causing a natural disaster, then either Satan is more powerful than God, or Satan is smarter than God. This is, in effect, what adherents to the “Satan gained control over the world at Adam’s fall” theory are saying. They claim that Satan has a legal right to do whatever he pleases on the earth because he stole Adam’s lease. Now, supposedly, God would like to stop Satan but can’t because He must honor Adam’s lease which Satan now possesses. In other words, God was too stupid to foresee what would happen at the fall, but Satan, being more intelligent than God, has now gained power that God wishes he didn’t have. Personally, I’m not about to say that Satan is more wise than God.

Hopefully, in the previous chapter, you have come to realize that the “Satan-Gained” theory is an unscriptural idea. If it were true, we would want to know why Satan doesn’t cause more earthquakes and hurricanes than he presently does, and why he doesn’t target large populations of Christians. (If you say “because God won’t let him target populations of Christians,” then you’ve just admitted that Satan cannot operate without God’s permission.)

When we narrow it down specifically, the only two possible answers to our question are these: Either (1) God causes earthquakes and hurricanes or (2) Satan does *with God’s permission*. There is no possibility that Satan causes them without God’s permission,

because that would be tantamount to saying that Satan is more powerful or more intelligent than God.

Can you see that regardless of which answer is correct, God is the one who is ultimately responsible? When people say, “God didn’t send that hurricane—Satan did with God’s permission,” they are not totally letting God “off the hook” as they might hope. If God could have stopped Satan from causing the hurricane, regardless of whether He wanted to or not, then He bears responsibility. Rebel humans may be the ones to *blame* because of their sin (if the hurricane was sent by God or permitted by God as judgment), but still, it is foolish to say that God is in no way involved or responsible.

### **Scripture’s Testimony**

What, specifically, does Scripture say about “natural disasters”? Does the Bible say that God or the devil causes them? Let’s look at earthquakes first because the Bible speaks of many.

According to Scripture, earthquakes might occur due to God’s judgment upon deserving sinners. We read in Jeremiah: “At His [God’s] wrath *the earth quakes*, and the nations cannot endure His indignation” (Jer. 10:10, emphasis added).

Isaiah warns,

From the Lord of hosts you will be punished with thunder and *earthquake* and loud noise, with whirlwind and tempest and the flame of a consuming fire (Is. 29:6, emphasis added).

In this passage God is given the credit for the earthquake. *Perhaps* it occurred because God *allowed* Satan to cause it, but certainly no Christian, after reading this, could say that Satan, acting *independently* of God, sent this particular earthquake! If an earthquake is a manifestation of God’s judgment, then God was involved.

You may recall that during the days of Moses, the earth opened up and swallowed Korah and his rebellious followers (see Num. 16:23-34). This was clearly an act of God’s judgment. Other examples of God’s judgment by earthquakes can be found in Ezek. 38:19; Ps. 18:7; 77:18; Hag. 2:6; Luke 21:11; Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13; 16:18.

Some earthquakes that are recorded in Scripture are not necessarily acts of God’s judgment, but nevertheless, were caused by God. For example, according to the gospel of Matthew, there was an earthquake when Jesus died (Matt. 27:51,54), and one when He was resurrected (Matt. 28:2). Did Satan cause those?

When Paul and Silas were singing praises to God at midnight in a Philippian jail, “suddenly there came a great *earthquake*, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains were unfastened” (Acts 16:26, emphasis added). Did Satan cause that earthquake? I don’t think so. Even the jailer was saved after he witnessed God’s power. And that is not the only God-caused earthquake in the book of Acts (see Acts 4:31).

I recently read of some well-meaning Christians who, upon hearing of a prediction of an earthquake in a certain area, traveled to the site to do “spiritual warfare” against the devil. Can you see the error in their assumption? It would have been scriptural for them to *pray to God for His mercy* upon the people who lived in that area. And if they had done that, there would have been no need to waste their time and money traveling to the potential earthquake site—they could have prayed to God right where they lived. But to battle the devil in order to stop an earthquake is unscriptural.

### **How About Hurricanes?**

The word *hurricane* is not found in Scripture, but we can definitely find some examples of strong winds there. For example:



Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do business on great waters; they have seen the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep. For *He spoke and raised up a stormy wind*, which lifted up the waves of the sea (Ps. 107:23-25, emphasis added).

*And the Lord hurled a great wind on the sea* and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up (Jonah 1:4, emphasis added).

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind should blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree (Rev. 7:1).

Obviously, God can start winds and stop them. Other scriptures which prove that God is in control of the wind are: Gen. 8:11; Ex. 10:13,19; 14:21; 15:10; Num. 11:31; Ps. 48:7; 78:76; 135:7; 147:18; 148:8; Is. 11:15; 27:8; Jer. 10:13; 51:16; Ezek. 13:11,13; Amos 4:9,13; Jonah 4:8; Hag. 2:17. In many of these examples, God used the wind as a means of judgment.

In all the Bible, there is only one scripture that gives Satan credit for sending a wind. It was during Job's trials, when a messenger reported to him: "A great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people and they died" (Job 1:19).

We know from reading the first chapter of the book of Job that it was Satan who caused Job's misfortunes. We must not forget, however, that Satan could do nothing to harm Job or his children without God's permission. So, again, we see that God is sovereign over the wind.

### **The Gale on Galilee**

What about the "fierce gale" that assailed Jesus and His disciples when they were once boating across the Sea of Galilee? Surely it must have been Satan who caused that storm, as God would never send a wind that would capsize a boat that contained His own Son. "A kingdom divided against itself will fall," and so why would God ever send a wind that could potentially harm Jesus and the twelve disciples?

These are good arguments, but let us stop and think for a moment. If God didn't send the storm and Satan did, then we still must admit that God *allowed* Satan to send it. So the same question must still be answered: Why would God allow Satan to send a storm that might potentially harm Jesus and the twelve?

Is there an answer? Perhaps God was teaching the disciples something about faith. Perhaps He was testing them. Perhaps He was testing Jesus, who had to be "tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). To be fully tested, Jesus had to have an opportunity to be tempted to fear. Perhaps God wanted to glorify Jesus. Perhaps He wanted to do all of the above.

God led the children of Israel to the edge of the Red Sea knowing full well they were trapped by Pharaoh's advancing army. But wasn't God *delivering* the Israelites? Then was He not working against Himself by leading them to a place where they would be massacred? Is this not an example of a "kingdom divided against itself"?

No, because God had no intention of letting the Israelites be massacred. And He had no intention, in either sending or allowing Satan to cause a gale on the Sea of Galilee, of letting Jesus and the twelve be drowned.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For further exploration of this often-neglected topic, see my book *God's Tests*.

Regardless, the Bible doesn't say that Satan sent that gale on the Sea of Galilee, and it doesn't say God did either. Some say it had to be Satan because Jesus *rebuked* it. Perhaps, but that is not a water-tight argument. Jesus didn't rebuke *God*—He rebuked the wind. God the Father could have done the same thing. That is, He could have stirred up the wind with a word, and then calmed it by rebuking it. Just because Jesus rebuked the gale is no proof that Satan caused it.

Again, we shouldn't base our entire theology on one verse that really proves nothing. I have already made reference to scores of scriptures that prove God is sovereignly in control of the wind, and He is most often given credit for sending it. My main point is that Satan, even though he is "god of this world," definitely does not have independent control over the wind or the right to cause a hurricane anytime or anywhere he desires.

Therefore, when hurricanes occur, we should not view it as something that is beyond God's control, something He would like to stop but can't. Jesus' rebuke of the gale on the Sea of Galilee should be proof enough that God can stop a hurricane if He desires.

And if God is sending (or allowing) a hurricane, then He must have some reason, and the most intelligent answer why He would send or allow a storm that causes widespread *catastrophic* devastation is that He is warning and judging disobedient people.

### **"But Hurricanes Sometimes Harm Christians!"**

But what about Christians who are affected by natural disasters? When a hurricane hits, it doesn't just demolish the homes of non-Christians. Aren't Christians exempt from God's wrath due to Jesus' sacrificial death? Then how can we say that God is the one ultimately behind natural disasters when they might very well harm His own children?

These are indeed difficult questions. We must realize, however, that the answers aren't any easier if we base them upon the false premise that Satan causes natural disasters. If Satan causes all natural disasters, then why does God *allow* him to cause things that might harm God's own children? We still face the same theological problem.

The Bible does state plainly that those who are in Christ are "not destined for wrath" (1 Thes. 5:9). At the same time, the Bible says that "the wrath of God abides on" those who don't obey Jesus (John 3:36). Yet how can God's wrath abide upon the unsaved without affecting the saved, when the saved live right among the unsaved? The answer is that, it often can't, and we should face up to that fact.

In the days of the exodus, all the Israelites were living together in one location, and the plagues which God sent as judgment upon the Egyptians did not harm them (see Ex. 8:22-23; 9:3-7; 24-26; 12:23). But with us, we live and work side-by-side with the "Egyptians." If God is to judge them by means of a natural disaster, then how are we to escape?

*Escape* is definitely the key word in understanding the answer to this question. Although Noah escaped God's full wrath when God flooded the earth, he still was adversely affected, as he had to labor to build the ark and then had to spend a year on board with a multitude of smelly animals. (Incidentally, both Old and New Testaments give *God* the credit for the flood of Noah, not Satan; see Gen. 6:17; 2 Pet. 2:5).

Lot escaped with his life when God's judgment fell upon Sodom and Gomorrah, but he still lost everything he had in the destruction of the fire and brimstone. God's judgment upon wicked people affected a righteous man.

Years in advance, Jesus had forewarned the believers in Jerusalem to flee when they saw their city surrounded by armies, because those would be "days of vengeance" (Luke 21:22-23)—clearly indicating God's wrathful purpose for allowing the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Praise God that the Christians who heeded Christ's warning escaped with their lives, but they still lost what they had to leave behind in Jerusalem.

In all three of the above examples, we see that God's people may very well suffer to some degree when God's judgment falls upon the wicked. We cannot, therefore, jump to

the conclusion that God is not responsible for natural disasters because they sometimes affect Christians.

### **But What About Babies and Children Who Suffer?**

A similar argument that is used to prove that God is not in any way responsible for natural disasters is that children and babies are often affected adversely. But, again, that argument does not hold water according to the Bible. For example, when God flooded the earth in Noah's day, babies and children were drowned. That is just one of numerous biblical examples when God's judgment upon wicked people resulted in the deaths of children.

But what alternative does God have when He judges evil people who also happen to be parents? Would it have been better for Joshua and the Israelites, rather than kill every man, woman, and child in the promised land as God commanded, to have spared the children and then raised them themselves? How would those children have reacted to being raised by the people who killed their parents? And at what age would the division be between those killed and those spared? You can see that if God destroys an entire wicked population of adults, such as He did in Sodom and Gomorrah, the children and babies are going to suffer—regardless of whether they live or die. The best alternative of those two terrible alternatives is that the children die. I'm convinced that any children under the so-called "age of accountability" would be immediately with the Lord at their deaths and be comforted and well taken care of in heaven.

We need to face up to the fact that it is impossible to punish parents without affecting their children. For example, when a father commits a crime and ends up in jail for five years, it affects his children. When that happens, as it does all the time, no one accuses the government of being unfair or cruel. No, the government is only fulfilling its duty to protect society from evildoers. The person to blame for the child's suffering is the father who broke the law.

By the same token, when the moral Judge of the universe judges a parent and that judgment adversely affects his children, God is not the one to blame. In reality, the sinful acts of parents are exposed as even more sinful, as they know full well that because of their own sins, their own innocent children might very well suffer consequences. When innocent children are harmed in a natural disaster, the evil adults are to blame. My main point is that we cannot conclude that God is not responsible for natural disasters because those disasters affect children.

### **What Then Shall We Do?**

We live in a world that is cursed by God, a world that is experiencing the wrath of God all the time. Paul wrote that "the wrath of God is revealed [not "*going to be* revealed"] from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom. 1:18). As those who are living among an evil, God-cursed world, we cannot completely escape the effects of God's wrath upon it, even though that wrath is not aimed specifically at us.

Knowing this, what should we do? First, we should trust God. Jeremiah wrote:

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit (Jer. 17:7-8).

Notice Jeremiah did not say that the man who trusts in the Lord will never be faced with a drought. No, when the heat and the famine come, the man who trusts in the Lord is like a tree that extends its roots by a stream. He has another source of supply, even while the world languishes around him. The story of Elisha being fed by ravens during the

famine in Israel comes to mind as an example (see 1 Kings 17:1-6). David wrote of the righteous, “In the days of famine they will have abundance” (Ps. 37:19).

But aren’t famines caused by the devil? No, not according to Scripture. God always takes the responsibility, and famine is often spoken of as a consequence of His wrath upon deserving people. For example:

Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, “Behold, *I am about to punish them!* The young men will die by the sword, *their sons and daughters will die by famine*” (Jer. 11:22, emphasis added).

Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Behold, *I am sending* upon them the sword, *famine*, and pestilence, and I will make them like split-open figs that cannot be eaten due to rottenness” (Jer. 29:17)

“Son of man, if a country sins against Me by committing unfaithfulness, and *I stretch out My hand against it, destroy its supply of bread, send famine against it*, and cut off from it both man and beast...” (Ezek. 14:13, emphasis added).

“You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?” declares the Lord of hosts, “Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house. Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And *I called for a drought* on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands” (Hag. 1:9-11, emphasis added).

In the fourth example above, we read that the Israelites were given the blame for the drought because of their sin, but still, God claimed responsibility for sending it. For additional references to God causing famine, see Deut. 32:23-24; 2 Sam. 21:1; 24:12-13; 2 Kin. 8:1; Ps. 105:16; Is. 14:30; Jer. 14:12,15-16; 16:3-4; 24:10; 27:8; 34:17; 42:17; 44:12-13; Ezek. 5:12,16-17; 6:12; 12:16; 14:21; 36:29; Rev. 6:8; 18:8). Jesus Himself said that God “sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45). God controls the rain.

If God sends a famine upon evil people, and we happen to live among those evil people, then we should trust that He will provide for our needs. Paul affirmed that famine cannot separate us from the love of Christ!: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or *famine*, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Rom. 8:35, emphasis added). Notice Paul did not say that Christians will never be faced with a famine, but rather implied that they might, even though he, as a student of the Scriptures, knew that famines can be sent by God to judge the wicked.

### **Obey and Insure**

Second, we should be obedient and use godly wisdom to avoid being caught in any of God’s wrath that is aimed at the world. Noah had to build his ark, Lot had to head for the hills, the Jerusalem Christians had to flee from their city; all of these had to obey God in order to avoid getting caught in His judgment upon the wicked.

If I lived in a hurricane zone, I’d make sure I had hurricane insurance. If I lived near a fault in the earth I’d either move or have earthquake insurance. And I’d pray. Every Christian should pray and remain sensitive to the One whom Jesus promised would “disclose to you what is to come” (John 16:13) so that he can avoid God’s wrath upon the world.

We read in Acts 11 of the prophet Agabus who warned of an impending famine that could have been potentially disastrous to Christians living in Judea. Consequently, an offering was received by Paul and Barnabas for their relief (see Acts 11:28-30).

Can such things happen today? Certainly, because the Holy Spirit hasn't changed, nor has God's love waned. It is unfortunate, however, that some in the body of Christ are not open to such gifts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit, and thus, because they "quench the Spirit" (1 Thes. 5:19) miss out on some of God's best.

In his autobiography, the late president and founder of the Full Gospel Businessmen, Demos Shakarian, recounts how God spoke through an illiterate boy-prophet to the Christians living in Armenia in the late 1800's. He warned them of an impending holocaust, and as a result, thousands of Pentecostal Christians who believed in such supernatural manifestations fled the country, including Shakarian's own grandparents. Shortly thereafter, a Turkish invasion of Armenia resulted in the slaughter of over a million Armenians, including those Christians who refused to heed God's warning.<sup>4</sup>

We would be wise to remain open to the Holy Spirit and be obedient to God, or else it is quite possible that we might experience a dose of God's wrath that He really doesn't want us to experience. Elisha once instructed a woman: "Arise and go with your household, and sojourn wherever you can sojourn; for the Lord has called for a famine, and it shall even come on the land for seven years" (2 Kin. 8:1). What if that woman hadn't listened to the prophet?

In the book of Revelation we read an interesting warning to God's people to come out of "Babylon" lest they be caught in God's judgment upon her:

And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, "Come out of her [Babylon], my people, that you may not participate in her sins and *that you may not receive of her plagues*; for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities....For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong" (Rev. 18:4-5,8, emphasis added).

In summary, God is sovereign over the weather and natural disasters. God has repeatedly proven Himself as Lord over nature in the Bible, from His causing forty days of rain during Noah's day, to His raining hailstones as well as sending other natural plagues upon Israel's enemies, to His stirring up the wind against Jonah's boat, to His rebuking the storm in the Sea of Galilee. He is, as Jesus said, "Lord of heaven and earth" (Matt. 11:25). For additional specific scriptural proof of God's lordship over nature, see Josh. 10:11; Job 38:22-38; Jer. 5:24; 10:13; 31:35; Ps. 78:45-49; 105:16; 107:33-37; 135:6-7; 147:7-8,15-18; Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17.

### **Doesn't the Original Language Actually Say That God "Permitted" These Things?**

A common explanation that is designed to "defend" God's loving character is that the original language of the Bible has been mistranslated. They would like us to believe that

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<sup>4</sup> There are, unfortunately, plenty of self-proclaimed prophets who are always predicting that California is going to slide into the ocean on a certain date, or some other such disaster. I wouldn't pay a bit of attention to any prophet unless he had a *proven* prophetic ministry with an accurate track-record, or unless God validated his ministry by some convincing accompanying sign, as He did in the case of the illiterate boy-prophet of whom Demos Shakarian wrote. See his book, *The Happiest People on Earth*, pp. 19-22 for the details.

when the Bible states God “*sent* a famine,” the Hebrew really says that He “*permitted* a famine” and so on.

Even if this were true, again, it really doesn’t “let God off the hook” as some hope it will. If God *permits* a famine, then He obviously still bears some responsibility, as it could not have happened without His permission.

We need to wake up to the fact that we don’t need to “let God off the hook.” He is who He is, and He always acts in accordance with His perfect character. The real problem is that too many Christians do not understand God’s character at all, thinking that He is all love and thus is never angered or wrathful. The fact is, however, that God is not only perfect in love, but also in holiness, justice and judgment, which are attributes that stem from His perfect love. The Bible is packed with examples of God’s righteous wrath. In fact, unless we understand that God is wrathful, we cannot comprehend what Jesus did on the cross for us. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, suffering the wrath of God that we deserved.

Have the many Hebrew and Greek verbs which speak of God’s actions been mistranslated in the Bible? Does the ancient Hebrew or Greek language actually say that God did certain things in the permissive rather than causative sense? Actually, no, and if you ask any Hebrew or Greek language scholars those questions, they will give you the same answer. God unapologetically does what He does, and there is no need for us to try to make Him look better by claiming that He is really not responsible for certain things for which He claims responsibility. Additionally, even in cases when God *permits Satan* to bring harm to deserving people, God wants us to know that it isn’t the devil who is punishing them, but He Himself. God is the holy one; Satan is the original sinner.

### **A Few Questions Answered**

If God is judging people through famines, floods, and earthquakes, then is it wrong for us, as God’s representatives, to assist and relieve the suffering of those whom God is punishing?

No, absolutely not. We should realize that God loves everyone, including people He judges. As strange as it may seem to our ears, His judgment through natural disasters is actually an indication of His love. How can that be? Through the hardship and difficulties that natural disasters cause, God is warning people whom He loves that He is holy and judgmental, and that there is a consequence for sin. God allows temporal suffering in order to help people wake up to see their need for a Savior—in order that they might escape *eternal* suffering. That is love!

As long as people are still breathing, God is still showing them undeserved mercy and there is time for them to repent. Through our compassion and assistance, we can demonstrate God’s love for people who are experiencing His temporal wrath, but who can be saved from His eternal wrath. Natural disasters are opportunities to reach out to the world for which Jesus died. I know of a church that won scores of people to Christ as they demonstrated His sacrificial love in practical ways during the aftermath of a hurricane.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> And it seems that here in the United States, we have many opportunities to minister to people in the aftermath of natural disasters. Richard Hallgren, executive director of the American Meteorologist Society, says that “the United States has more severe weather and flooding than any other nation of the world.” According to statistics gathered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in the average year “the United States can expect some 10,000 violent thunderstorms, 5,000 floods, more than 800 tornadoes and several hurricanes.” (Source: *Why All the Crazy Weather?*, Reader’s Digest, December, 1993, p. 96.) Is God sending the United States a message?

Isn't reaching people with the gospel the most important thing in this life? When we have an eternal perspective, the suffering of those caught in natural disasters is nothing in comparison to the suffering of those who will spend eternity in hell.

It is a fact the people generally become more receptive to the gospel when they are suffering. There are numerous biblical examples of this phenomena, from the repentance of Israel during the oppression of neighboring nations, to Jesus' story of the prodigal son. Christians should view natural disasters as times when the harvest is potentially very ripe.

### **Let's Tell the Truth**

But what should our message be to those picking up the pieces of their lives after a hurricane or earthquake? How shall we answer if they ask for a theological answer to their predicament? We should tell them the truth, the truth found in the Bible, not someone's theory. Can you see how inconsistent our message sounds when we tell suffering people,

“God did *not* send this hurricane, because God loves you. He would *never* send something that would cause so many people to suffer so much. He does, however, want you to repent of your sins and receive Jesus.”

“What will happen to me if I don't receive Jesus?”

“God will to send you to hell where you and everyone like you will spend an eternity suffering as you burn in a lake of fire.”

Why is it so difficult for us to believe that God would send a hurricane when we believe that He will incarcerate millions of people in hell to suffer forever?

Let's be honest with what the Bible teaches, and tell people that God is holy and that their sin does have consequences. Let's tell them that the ferocious roar of the hurricane is but a small sampling of the power that the almighty God possesses, and the fear they felt as their house shook is nothing in comparison to the terror that will grip them in hell. And let's tell them that even though we all deserve to spend eternity in hell, God so loved the world that He sent Jesus to pay the penalty for our sins on the cross, and through Him, we can be saved from God's wrath.

“But we shouldn't scare people about God, should we?” some ask. The answer is found in Scripture: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). Until people fear God, they really don't know anything.

I think that many of us have failed miserably in conveying the true gospel to the world around us.<sup>6</sup> God's judgment is falling around us everyday, and we tell people a lie about why such things happen—that it is the devil's work. And Oh how “the father of lies” loves for Christians to help him spread his lies!

### **What if People Become Angry With God?**

But might not people become angry at God because of their suffering? Perhaps they will, but we gently need to help them see their pride. None have a right to complain at God for His treatment of them, because we all deserve to be in hell *right now*. Rather than cursing God for their calamity, people should be praising Him for loving them so much to warn them. God has every right to ignore everyone, leaving them to follow their

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<sup>6</sup> I have authored two other books, titled *Christ's Incredible Cross*, and *The Great Gospel Deception*, that address the issue of the many unscriptural “gospels” that are proclaimed today.

selfish paths to hell. But God loves people and is calling out to them every day. He quietly calls them through the flowering of apple trees, the songs of birds, the majesty of mountains, and the twinkling of a myriad of stars. He calls to them through their consciences, through His body the church, and through His Holy Spirit. But they ignore His call.

Certainly it is not God's will for people to have to suffer, but when they keep ignoring Him, He loves them enough to use more drastic measures to get their attention so that they won't spend eternity in hell. Hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and famines are some of those more drastic measures.

### **Is God Unfair in His Judgment?**

When we look at God and our world from a biblical perspective, then and only then are we thinking rightly. The biblical perspective is that everyone deserves to be in hell right now, but that God is merciful. When suffering people say they deserve better treatment from God, surely He must groan.

Once we understand God's perspective, we no longer question His fairness. Everyone is receiving much more mercy than he or she deserves. The person whose home has been destroyed in an earthquake has no right to be angry at God. He should be thanking God that he is still alive. Those whose homes are still standing should be twice as thankful for the even greater mercy they've been shown.

In keeping with this theme, Jesus once commented on two contemporary calamities. We read in Luke's gospel:

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him [Jesus] about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:1-5).

The Galileans who died at Pilate's hand could not say, "God has treated us unfairly by not saving us from Pilate!" No, they were sinners who deserved to die. And, according to Jesus, those Galileans who survived would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that they were less sinful than their murdered neighbors. They had not *earned* greater favor from God—they had been *granted* greater mercy.

Christ's message was clear: "You are *all* sinners. Sin has consequences. For now, you live because of God's mercy. So repent before it is too late for you as well."

Jesus concluded His comments on those tragedies with a parable about God's mercy:

And He began telling this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it, and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down'" (Luke 13:6-9).

Here are the justice and mercy of God illustrated. God's justice cries out, "Cut down the worthless tree!" But His mercy pleads, "No, give it more time to bring forth fruit." Every person who is without Christ is like that tree.



## **Can We Rebuke Hurricanes and Floods?**

One final question about natural disasters. Is it not true that if we have enough faith, we can rebuke and stop natural disasters from occurring?

To have faith means to believe God's revealed will. Faith, therefore, must be founded upon God's own word, or it is not faith at all, but rather hope or presumption. There is no place in the Bible where God gives us the promise that we can rebuke and calm hurricanes, and so there is no way a person could have faith to do so (apart from God sovereignly granting him faith).

Let me explain further. The only way a person could have faith to rebuke a hurricane is if he was certain God did not want that hurricane to strike a certain geographical area. As we have learned from Scripture, God is the one who controls the wind and is thus responsible for hurricanes. Therefore, it would be impossible for someone to have confident faith that he could stop a hurricane when God Himself has decreed its occurrence. The only exception to this would be if God changed His mind about the hurricane, which He might do in response to someone's prayer that He show mercy, or in response to the repentance of the people whom He was about to judge (the story of Nineveh in Jonah's day comes to mind as an example). Yet even if God changed His mind, still no one could have faith to rebuke and calm a hurricane unless that person *knew* God had changed His mind and also knew that God wanted him to rebuke and calm the storm.

The only person who ever rebuked and calmed a great wind was Jesus. The only way any of us could do it would be if God gave us the "gift of faith," (or the gift of "special faith" as it is sometimes called), one of the nine gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12:7-11. As with all the gifts of the Spirit, the gift of faith operates not as we might will, but only as the Spirit wills (1 Cor. 12:11). Therefore, unless God gives you special faith to rebuke an oncoming hurricane, you should not remain in its path, supposedly acting in faith. You should get out of the way! I would also suggest that you pray for God's protection, and ask Him to have mercy upon the people He was judging, asking Him to spare their lives that they might have more time to repent.

Notice that when Paul was bound for Rome on a boat that was driven for two weeks by gale-force winds, he did not calm it by a rebuke (see Acts 27:14-44). The reason he didn't is because he couldn't. Also notice that God did have mercy upon every person on board, as all 276 of them survived the resulting shipwreck (see Acts 27:24,34,44). I would like to think that God had mercy upon them because Paul prayed for God to have mercy on them.

**Myth #4: "Satan, as 'the god of this world' has control over everything on the earth, including human governments, natural disasters, and the weather."**

No, God, who is "Lord of heaven and earth," has sovereign control over the entire universe and earth, including human governments, natural disasters, and the weather. Satan only has God's permission to rule over the kingdom of darkness, which includes evil spirits upon the earth and unsaved human beings. As soon as a person receives Christ as Lord and Savior, he is taken out of Satan's kingdom and authority and placed into God's kingdom, because on the cross, Jesus paid the penalty for our sin and broke Satan's power over us.