

THEODICY: WHERE WOULD A JUST GOD BE IF NOT IN THE
EARTHQUAKE?

By Rev. Anne Bracket

“Woe! To the men, on earth who dwell,
Nor dread th’Almighty frown,
When God doth all his wrath reveal,
And shower his judgments down!
Sinners, expect those heaviest showers,
To meet your God prepare,
When lo! The Seventh Angel pours
His vial in the Air!¹

Charles Wesley wrote those words in the year 1755, after the great earthquake in Lisbon, when perhaps it did seem as if the seventh angel from the Book of Revelation had poured his vial into the air, and the final plague sent to afflict God’s people had occurred. For Charles Wesley “...God is in the earthquake now”² as his eschatological hopes and fears seemed to be coming true:

“The mighty Shock *seems now* begun,
Beyond Example great,
And lo! the World’s Foundations groan
As at their instant Fate!
Jehovah shakes the shatter’d Ball,
Sign of the general Doom!
The Cities of the Nations fall,
And *Babel’s* Hour is come.”³

¹ Wesley, C. Hymns Occasioned By The Earthquake, March 8, 1750. To Which is added An Hymn upon the pouring out of the Seventh Vial. Rev. xvi.xvii, &c. Occasioned by the Destruction of Lisbon. Second Edition Bristol, England: E. Farley, 1756, 10 part 1

² Wesley, C. 1750, Hymn V.

Clergy, scholars and ordinary people throughout Europe wrestled with the cataclysmic destruction of the great city of Lisbon.⁴ It might be helpful in understanding why this earthquake made such an impression on Europeans like Charles and John Wesley if we put it in context.

November 1, 1755, it is All Saints Day in this largely Roman Catholic Country of Portugal. At 9:30 in the morning the basilicas of the city would have been filled with worshippers attending Mass. The Basilica de Sao Vincente de Fora was filled with worshippers as the earthquake began; within minutes, the church crumbled and the massive stones crushed the congregation. The first tremor lasted just three and a half minutes, destroying buildings and killing thousands. Those who survived the initial quake rushed to the docks, away from collapsing buildings, only to find the ocean was gone. As the crowd watched, within thirty minutes of the quake, the ocean returned in a giant tidal wave engulfing the city and killing thousands more. Into the horror of this destruction the priests of the Inquisition were rumored to have “roamed the ruins rounding up innocent people, dubbing them “heretics” and hanging them on the spot for angering God...” The shock waves of the Lisbon earthquake were felt throughout Europe and North Africa. Tidal waves reached Finland, North Africa and Barbados. Modern experts estimate that this earthquake might have

³ Wesley, C. 1750, 10.

⁴ Kendrick, T.D., The Lisbon Earthquake. Philadelphia, New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1955.

registered a staggering magnitude nine on the Richter scale.⁵ One of the richest cities in the world was destroyed in a matter of minutes. Along with the huge loss of human life, estimated by some as high as 60,000, the economic repercussions would also be felt throughout Europe. This event changed the way society thought; the way the world was viewed, perhaps ending the age of optimism.

Clergy were some of the first to wrestle with this event. John and Charles Wesley joined the throng of preachers urging their country to repent. Both preached their share of sermons, wrestled with the subject in journals, and of course Charles wrote hymns. Charles preached about keeping awake, being aware of what meaning could be found in the earthquakes. In his journal entry for October 11, 1756 he writes:

“They forced me to preach first, which I did from Zech. Xiii.: “The third part I will bring through the fire.” My brother George seconded me in the words of our Lord: “I say unto all, Watch.” The prayers and hymns were all attended with a solemn power. Few, if any, I hope, went unawakened away.”⁶

In his sermon “The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes” he used this scripture reference: “O come hither, and behold the works of the Lord; what destruction he hath brought upon the earth!”⁷ Throughout this sermon it is clear that sin is the cause, earthquakes the effect of God’s anger. And the cure is repentance, heeding God’s warning, staying awake.

⁵ McEvers, J. and Rosenber, K., *The Astrology of the Macrocosm*. 338.

⁶ Charles Wesley’s *Journal* 2. 124-125.

⁷ Wesley, C. [The Cause And Cure Of Earthquakes](#). Text from the 1872 edition. First published in 1750. Gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/Wesley/sermons/serm-129.stm, 1

The hymn written on the occasion of the destruction of Lisbon and based on the pouring out of the seventh vial, from which I quoted a moment ago, was written in 1755 and then added to a collection of “earthquake” hymns first published in 1750 on the occasion of several earthquakes in and around London.

Charles based this hymn on chapters 16 and 17 of the Book of Revelation, declaring that the pouring out of the seventh vial, the final climatic plague sent by God to afflict humanity had occurred in the destruction of Lisbon. Charles saw in the destruction the hand of God still stretched out in wrath and judgment,⁸ perhaps in final apocalyptic judgment on sinful humankind. Charles could not help but see the beginning of the end, that final plague, the pouring out of the seventh vial, as he declared that God was in the earthquake now. Charles found many scriptural proofs that God was the cause of earthquakes. In his sermon “The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes,” Charles gives a few examples:

“Earthquakes are set forth by the inspired writers as God’s proper judicial act, or the punishment of sin: Sin is the cause, earthquakes the effect, of his anger. So the Psalmist: “The earth trembled and quaked; the very foundations also of the hills shook, and were removed, because he was wroth.” (Psalm xviii. 7.) So the Prophet Isaiah: “I will punish the world for their evil, --and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible: -- Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall removed out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger.” (Isaiah xiii. 11, 13.) And again: “Behold, the Lord maketh the earth empty; and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down,” (in the original, perverteth

⁸ Wesley, C. The Cause And Cure Of Earthquakes. Text from the 1872 edition. First published in 1750. Gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/Wesley/sermons/serm-129.stm, 1.

the face thereof,) “and scattereth abroad the inhabitants thereof. For the windows from on high are open, and the foundations of the earth do shake. The earth is utterly broken down, the earth is clean dissolved, the earth is moved exceedingly. The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage; and the transgression thereof shall be heavy upon it; and it shall fall and not rise again.” (Isa. 24:1, 18-20) “Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the God of Jacob.” (Ps. 114:7) “Thou shalt be visited of the Lord of hosts with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise.” (Isa. 29:6)”⁹

The earthquake in Lisbon was perhaps one of the most important events that caused Charles' heightened sense of eschatological judgment, yet certainly it was not the only reason that his thoughts were fraught with apocalyptic expectation. Kenneth Newport describes Charles's eschatological views as “...a very distinctive and vibrant force in his overall theological development.”¹⁰ The decade of the 1750's was a time that seemed calculated to give rise to just this type of expectation. The Gospel of Mark chapter 13 seems to be a listing of the events affecting the British during this decade. “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”¹¹ The list of events in Britain can begin in February of 1750 as the

⁹ Wesley, C. The Cause And Cure Of Earthquakes. Text from the 1872 edition. First published in 1750. Gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/Wesley/sermons/serm-129.stm, 2.

¹⁰ Newport, K. G.C., “Charles Wesley and the End of the World”. Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society. Ed. S. T. Kimbrough, 1996, 33-61.

¹¹ All Scripture references are from the New Revised Version.

area around London experienced a series of earthquakes; Britain also experienced a cattle-plague with many of their livestock dying¹², other natural disasters such as the huge landslide at Whitson Cliffs¹³ occurred. Wars and rumors of wars abounded, France threatening to invade Britain, and the colonies in North America restless. Along with these problems the British watched the Inquisition in Portugal with outrage as Christians and Jews succumbed to the power of the inquisition.

Along with the end-time debates the eighteenth century challenged Christians intellectually and morally. The debate between science and religion on the nature and cause of earthquake took on special meaning in light of Lisbon's destruction. In the debate between the natural and the supernatural, between natural law and providence, and between faith and reason, a thinking, reasoning Christian must have struggled with these new ideas. On which side should a Christian land? On the side of faith or the side of reason? Into this debate the earthquake of Lisbon became an intellectual crises. Was God the cause of the earthquake? Or was the earthquake a natural phenomenon of simply escaping gas or shifting of the earth? Was there a natural explanation, or was there a supernatural explanation? Could a natural reason include God, or must it exclude God?

¹² Kimbrough, S.T., "Charles Wesley's Bristol Hymns and Poems", Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society,

Ed. S.T. Kimbrough 1997,5-29.

¹³ Wesley, J. Serious thoughts on the Late Earthquake in Lisbon. 1755.

In "Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon" John

Wesley argued against a simple natural cause of earthquakes:

"If by affirming, "All this is purely natural," you mean, it is not providential, or that God has nothing to do with it, this is not true, that is, supposing the Bible to be true. For supposing this, you may descant ever so long on the natural causes of murrain, winds, thunder, lightning, and yet you are altogether wide of the mark, you prove nothing at all, unless you can prove that God never works in or by natural causes. But this you cannot prove; nay, none can doubt of his so working, who allows the Scripture to be of God. For this asserts, in the clearest and strongest terms, that "all things (in nature) "serve him;" that (by or without a train of natural causes) He "maketh a way for the lightning and the thunder;" in general, that "fire and hail, snow and vapour, wind and storm, fulfil his world." Therefore, allowing there are natural causes of all thee, they are still under the direction of the Lord of nature: Nay, what is nature itself, but the art of God, or God's method of acting in the material world? True philosophy therefore ascribes all to God,..."¹⁴

For both John and Charles Wesley they have already in place a theological hermeneutic for interpreting the Lisbon earthquake and any other natural or manmade disaster. Theirs is a theology of a personal God of overwhelming love, truth and grace. God is a not distant and uninvolved in God's creation. As John said in "Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon" "Nature is the art of God, it is God acting upon the created world." For both Charles and John, these natural phenomena must be acts of God, for only if they are acts of God, can they translate them into personal acts *with meaning*. The interpretation the Wesley's place on the earthquake is that God's justice means not only executing justice for God's

¹⁴ Wesley, J. 1755, 7.

people, but also, God executing a just judgment for sin. If the earthquakes occur outside of God's control, then John asks: "Who will you pray to?"

Beside the judgment there is also the important element that earthquakes are a warning to God's people. Earthquakes are a warning to repent and return to God.

Speaking of the mild earthquakes in London as a warning John Wesley describes in his journal the earthquake of March 8, 1750:

"It was about a quarter after twelve, that the earthquake began at the skirts of the town. It began in the south-east, went through Southwark, under the river, and then from one end of London to the other." He continues "There were three distinct shakes, or wavings to and fro, attended with an hoarse, rumbling noise, like thunder. How gently does God deal with this nation! O that our repentance may prevent heavier marks of his displeasure!

Lisbon then if not the final apocalyptic event, was a warning of no small magnitude. To the Wesley's, God seemed to be trying to get people to awake and to repent and believe the Gospel.

Perhaps Lisbon was chosen as the great warning because of what the Wesley's would have deemed her major sin. Lisbon was noted for the Inquisition. This injustice was a topic approached by both John and Charles Wesley. In John's sermon on the earthquake, which we will discuss later today, he remarks:

"And what shall we say of the late accounts from Portugal? That some thousand houses, and many

thousand persons, are no more! That a fair city is now in ruinous heaps! Is there indeed a God that judges the world? And is he now making inquisition for blood? If so, it is not surprising, he should begin there, where so much blood has been poured on the ground like water! Where so many brave men have been murdered, in the most base and cowardly as well as barbarous manner, almost every day, as well as every night, while none regarded or laid it to hear." He continues: "Yea, how long has that bloody House of Mercy, the scandal not only of religion, but even of human nature, stood to insult both heaven and earth! "And shall I not visit for these things, saith the Lord? Shall not my soul be avenged on such a city as this?"¹⁵

The Wesley's distress over the injustice of the Inquisition gave them a ready made hermeneutical lens for interpreting the Lisbon earthquake. The sin was so visible and so unjust. The Inquisition was sin, this Roman Catholic Country practiced idolatry, the richness of Lisbon against the poverty of the countryside all spoke of a sinful people. The earthquake in this part of the world must be an act of God. If it is an act of God then the Wesley's can translate the earthquakes into personal acts with meaning.... since their God is a personal one with motives of wrath and redemption.

A personal God requires personal repentance. In the hymn Charles wrote on the occasion of the Lisbon earthquake he declares that the "Cities of the Nations fall, and Babel's hour is come" Since Lisbon is the city destroyed the readers thoughts immediately turn to that city, yet as Charles announces that "Jesus descends in dread array to judge the scarlet whore:" The surprise is that it is no longer Lisbon sinking beneath the flood instead

¹⁵ Wesley, J. Serious Thoughts Occasioned By the Late Earthquake at Lisbon. 1755, 2.

“Britain is no more!” Charles quickly gets to the heart of the matter when in the next stanza he asks: “When earth and heaven are fled and gone, O where shall I appear?” National sin, requires national repentance, but it must begin with the personal repentance of one who desires “to flee from the wrath to come!”¹⁶.

In Charles sermon “The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes” and in John’s sermon “Serious Thoughts on the Occasion of the Late Great Earthquake in Lisbon” both draw to a close talking about death. All the argument about nature versus God, eschatological and apocalyptic expectation, all of this is brought to a head by the one common denominator. “Art thou ready to die?” Charles asks. Maybe you can flee from the earthquake, maybe the end of times is not now, maybe God is not in the earthquake, but how will you approach your death? Nothing is more personal than this question. “Art thou prepared to die?” For that is the one end time situation that all must face. In the end, for Charles and John it seems that perhaps they did not need to wrestle with a just God being in the earthquake. God is in the earthquake because Gods judgment is everywhere, because ultimately all face God’s judgment. You can’t escape the judgment whether it occurs in the earthquake or the flood, or if you die in your bed. All must be awake and prepared to die. Although God continues to judge, God continues to grant grace to those who desire it because God *is* a God of love, truth and grace.

¹⁶ Wesley, C. 1750.

Charles Wesley urges people to repent, to practice right worship. Throughout his “earthquake hymns” he reminds the readers that false worship means nothing to God. God is to be worshipped in truth. Charles warns in hymn IV that Tophet, that place of child sacrifice, that place of false worship is part of our lives too. God is not impressed by useless sacrifice, God requires genuine worship.

Charles’ use of the Book of Revelation as his starting point for the final hymn reminds us that worship is central. The Book of Revelation is filled with examples of true heavenly worship, the worship that we are all called to participate in. Justo Gonzalez in his commentary on Revelation reminds us that it is when our lives are completely dedicated to living justly that we truly worship God.¹⁷

As a preacher to exegete a biblical text without also drawing meaning for a community of faith seems pointless. So too, these ponderings on theodicy, on the God of the earthquake and the God who calls us to repentance cry out to have meaning for the community of faith assembled here. Why read these sermons and hymns of the Wesley’s except that we too hear the call to right worship? We hear the call to repentance, the call to live justly, the call to be awake.

The question for us is no longer: Is a just God in the earthquake? The question is: Are we in the earthquake? And the answer is yes, as those called by God we must be in the earthquake, or the famine, or the places of

injustice in our world. We are in the earthquake not as the cause, but as agents for redemption of God's creation.

We are a people who long for fairness. We want sinners punished, we want the righteous rewarded. We call out to God to execute justice. We ask why does God not intervene when children are murdered or abused? Why does God allow earthquakes and floods and famines to oppress the ones already so heavily oppressed? Why is there evil in God's world? These questions are age old. The answer to the question is also age old. The answer is but another question. *Why do we allow injustice?* Why do we worship God with our lips but not with our hearts? Why are we not using the earthquake and the flood and the famine as opportunities for redemption?

There is a story told of Mother Theresa: A woman asks her "Is God just?", as the sister busied herself washing a weak and wizened woman who had just been brought to the converted Leprosarium. "I don't know", she might have replied, and "exactly what do you mean by just? Here hold her up while I get a clean sari." Suddenly you are confronted with an instance of the injustice that brought such outrage. And you must help. And hold. And comfort. Railing against injustice is not what this woman needs, she needs a clean sari. And a clean bed. As you lay her in the bed, you notice the woman's eyes, she hasn't said a word to you, but her eye they speak to you. "Wait", you call out, as Mother Theresa quickly moves toward her next task, "it's doing the right thing. That's what I mean by just." "Are you?" Mother

¹⁷ Gonzalez, J. L. For the Healing of the Nations. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999, 109.

Theresa asks, handing you a sheet, expecting you to tuck it under the plastic-covered mattress. “No, I mean God. God doing the right thing.”

Mother Theresa pauses, looking over the half-lifted mattress, “And how will you know what it means to do the right thing, unless you do it?”

We will only know God’s justice, we will only understand God’s justice when we seek to live out God’s justice. We are in the earthquake with our God, whether we want to be there or not. But the final question is: How will we live in that earthquake, seeking justice by living and working for the rock of ages, or hiding behind the unstable rock of a shaky world?

I would like to let Charles Wesley have the final word:

“Now only now against that Hour
We may a Place provide
Beyond the Grave, beyond the Power
Of Hell our Spirits hide:
Firm in the all-destroying Shock
May view the Final Scene,
For lo! The Everlasting Rock
Is cleft, to take us in.

By Faith we find the Place above,
The Rock that rent in twain,
Beneath the Shade of dying Love,
And in the Cleft remain;
Jesus, to thy dear Wounds we flee,
We sink into thy Side,
Assur’d that all who trust in Thee,
Shall evermore abide.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Wesley, C. Hymns Occasioned By The Earthquake, March 8, 1750. To Which is added An Hymn upon the pouring out of the Seventh Vial, Rev. xvi.xvii, &c. Occasioned by the Destruction of Lisbon. Second Edition Bristol, England: E. Farley, 1756, 10 part 1