

Hurricane Mitch -- God's Punishment?

by Mark Baker

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We see the destruction and the death that has hit the whole country and we wonder, why? Why did we experience something so horrible? Why so much suffering? We hear many who answer that Hurricane Mitch was a punishment sent by God like the flood of Noah. But the rainbow reminds us that God promised to never send a flood of destruction again (Genesis 9:11-17). That implies that Mitch was not an act of God. In the flood of Noah God saved the righteous; nevertheless, many righteous ones died during Hurricane Mitch. Even so, some say that the hurricane was a punishment for the wicked; others say that it was God punishing Honduras because of the high level of corruption or because of so much drug addiction. Others are sure that God punished the country for the statue of Christ which was constructed on Mount Picacho above Tegucigalpa. Nevertheless, today the statue remains standing, but Mitch destroyed numerous church buildings. Many evil and corrupt people are still alive and active and many honest people of integrity died or lost everything.

To say that God is the cause of this destruction not only shows lack of logic but also displays a mistaken concept of God and a misunderstanding of divine punishment. If we think that God is an angry being who looks down from heaven with accusing eyes, anxious to use a club that he holds in his hands then, yes, it makes sense to think that this hurricane came from God's hand. But God is not like this. In Jesus we see someone full of compassion, patience and forgiveness. Jesus is God incarnate and is the best revelation that we have of what God is like. If we don't see in Jesus a man with accusing eyes and a club in his hand, we know that God is not like this. And it is not only in the New Testament that we find a God of Love. The prophet Isaiah teaches us that God is anxious to show love and that God's wrath lasts for a moment but that God's compassion is eternal (Isaiah 30:18; 54:7-8).

Somebody could reply, "Yes, and this hurricane was a moment of God's wrath." But that reveals an erroneous notion of God's punishment. People today, and also in the time of Jesus, have commonly viewed sickness or tragedy as punishments from God. Jesus rejects this attitude (John 9:1-2; Luke 13:1-5); therefore, we should not immediately conclude that this hurricane was a punishment or a product of God's wrath.

In the letter to the Romans Paul writes about the wrath of God. Paul describes a variety of sins but not a single time does he communicate that God stretches out his hand from heaven to punish people. What Paul says is that God gave them up to experience the consequences of their own actions (Romans 1: 18-32). That is to say, mistaken actions--sins--carry their own punishment as a product of the same actions. God expresses his wrath against those sins by letting us experience the consequences of our own actions. As the Psalmist David writes, God executes justice when the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands (Psalm 9:16).

It is true that there are examples in the Bible when God does seemingly stretch

out a hand and send a punishment from heaven (Genesis 19; and Luke 1:18-20 for example). But these situations are not frequent and for the most part we need to be very careful in proclaiming that something is a direct punishment sent by God. For example, in the Old Testament many of the expressions of the justice of God did not need God's action. Countries or empires fell as the result of their evil deeds. Their corruption and oppression of their subjects led to their downfall just as the prophets had said it would. The same thing has happened in to dictators this century. God did not have to take action so that Israel might go into exile. The nation followed its own path of disobedience and sin until it became devastated and exiled by its enemies. Nevertheless, the exile brought about the opportunity to repent.

Therefore, we would do well to follow Paul and say that the usual form of God's wrath is that God allows us to experience the consequences of our actions. For example, the destruction of this storm would have been much less if we had not cut down so many trees and burned down so many forests. In April and May the sky in Honduras was filled with smoke produced by the forest fires, and today the streets are filled with mud; these two situations are related. If there had been more vegetation and trees on the hills and mountains there would have been fewer mud slides and the forests would have absorbed more water. Unfortunately we suffer not only the consequences of our actions but also the consequences of the others' actions. For example, some lost their houses, even their lives, because some rich landlords had laid out streets and sold plots on land that was not secure. The poorest in Tegucigalpa had gathered pieces of wood and constructed shacks on the river banks, not because they wanted to live in those dangerous places but because the economic system had left them in such extreme poverty that they did not have the economic possibilities to live somewhere else.

In our minds we should not imagine a God with accusing eyes so furious that he sends a hurricane to hit us. Rather, we should imagine a God with loving eyes saddened because of our suffering. In God's eyes we can also see hope. God hopes that we will learn from our mistakes so that we might not suffer so much from the natural disasters to come.

Even so, if we hadn't cut down so many trees and burned so many forests, Hurricane Mitch still would have done a lot of damage to the Country. And so we ask ourselves, Why did we experience something so horrible? To say that God sent it as a punishment is an easy but mistaken answer that leads people to have a false notion of God. A much better response is, "I don't know. There are things that we don't understand." It is possible that disasters such as hurricanes are an expression of the decaying state of creation as fruit of original human sin, and that creation, itself, longs for the day when there will no longer be storms of destruction. We cannot know for sure the answer to these questions. But believing and trusting in the God revealed in Jesus Christ we can, through faith, say that God is a God of order and peace and therefore that God was not the author and cause of this hurricane. By faith we can bear that which we cannot understand.

It is evident that in Honduras there is a great need for reflection and repentance. God can use this tragedy to teach us a lot. With faith we can hope that God will cause positive things to come from something so negative as Mitch. Nevertheless, to say that God can make something good from something bad does not mean that God caused the bad.

This moment of so much suffering is exactly when we Christians need to proclaim love, mercy, and God's faithfulness most, instead of threatening the Honduran people with a God of accusing eyes and a club named, in this case, Mitch. This is the time to put ourselves on the side of those who are suffering so much and proclaim, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth (nor Hurricane Mitch), nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).