



# Wipe Every Tear From Their Eyes

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**O**n Aug. 4, 2019, my hometown of Dayton, Ohio, became the second city in 24 hours to experience a mass shooter. Nine innocent lives were lost on the streets of the beautiful historic Oregon District — a neighborhood where I spent the first three years of my life and one that continues to hold an emotional connection to my family.

The same darkness struck the city of El Paso, Texas, when a man opened fire inside a Wal-Mart as people went about their weekend shopping. He killed 22 people. In total, 31 men, women and children lost their lives in the two cities.

In the days following, news media and the public searched to understand these disasters. They raised questions about the shooters' upbringings, their pasts and their motives. Residents in the two cities began the process of mourning, coming together and standing up against hate and violence. Crosses, candles, stuffed bears were placed along the streets. Another mass shooting in America.

Disasters, both man-made and natural, shake the very core of our identities. The rational part of our brains cannot neatly connect the event with a why. Why did these men kill? Why did the tornado hit my house and not my neighbor's? Why did death appear today?

Beyond the questions debated on the nightly

*... It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearth-stones of a continent,  
And made forlorn  
The households born  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!  
And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth," I said;  
"For hate is strong,  
And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"  
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The Wrong shall fail,  
The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men."*

— Excerpted from Henry Wadsworth  
Longfellow's "Christmas Bells"

news and in the morning print, people in communities struck by disaster have deeper concerns. As people of faith, they question God's role: Why did God allow such a thing to happen? This existential crisis is not new to modern times.

Consider the great earthquake that struck the thriving city of Lisbon in 1755. The city, having seen a surge in population, was a forest of tall, crowded buildings built upon one another, overflowing with the masses. The structures, mere shells of cheap mate-

rials, could not withstand the trembling force of the quake. Fire broke out, a tsunami destroyed ships in the harbor and chaos spread. Tens of thousands of people were killed.

The news of the disaster reached every corner of Europe. People were shocked by the gravity of the destruction. Leaders in other cities began to wonder how their community might fare if struck by a similar event. Another conversation started, as well. Philosophers and theologians began to debate the meaning behind the devastation. They



questioned the role of religion, the power of God, the existence of Providence, evil and salvation. Accusations of heresy and blasphemy were made on both sides.

For some historians, the Lisbon earthquake was more than a natural disaster. The timing of the event coincided with intellectual and religious changes happening in Europe. It was a real-life example of a theoretical debate ignited by real-world events, thriving in universities and cafes. The unexplainable occurrence shattered a sense of comfort, safety and rationality for many.

One important intellectual who publicly discussed the impact of the event was the philosopher known as Voltaire (nom de plume for François-Marie Arouet). Voltaire wrote a poem entitled, “Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne,” or “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster,” in which he expressed doubt about the existence of a God who is considered all mighty and all good, but would still permit such a disaster. Voltaire challenged his contemporaries who said, “God is avenged. Their death is the price of their crimes,” or, “Yet, this misfortune ... is another’s good.” Voltaire’s lament is not only about the physical destruction caused by the earthquake, but about a spiritual destruction that challenged the predominant philosophy and theology of the day. “*One day, all will be well — this is our hope. All is well today — that is the illusion.*” A theology whereby a disaster like Lisbon was just a part of God’s plan did not connect with the reality of the situation. Voltaire and others wanted more.

The question of the “why?” behind disasters has yet to be answered. At least not in a definitive way. Philosophers and theologians have attempted to understand the role of our God in a world that is filled with death and suffering.

However, since the time of Voltaire’s poem, I believe we are making progress. Maybe not on an answer, but surely in our understanding of the divine. For example, Voltaire and his contemporaries had an image of God as above the world, using (or refusing to use) his power to manipulate events on Earth. This view of God as an abstract, distant figure has lost its predominance in many theological circles and been replaced by a God who suffers with creation.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel provides a vivid example of this suffering in God, in his book *Night*.<sup>1</sup> He uses the gruesome hanging of three prisoners, to explain God’s presence in a new way:

Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing...

And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking: “For God’s sake, where is God?”

And from within me, I heard a voice answer:

“Where is he? Here he is — hanging here on this gallows...”

Wiesel’s answer to the question “Where is God?” shatters the traditional theology of a God immutable by creation—a God that looks down from above and chooses not to interfere. Wiesel’s God is one that stands with the suffering and bears the pain along with those who suffer.

The concept of a suffering God expands in theology through the 20th century. Yet, it is a challenge for many people to accept. How can an almighty deity be moved by his simple creatures? What power do we have over God? Surely, a God that can be moved by us is one that is not in control of us.

A suffering God challenges people’s understanding of the divine. It scandalizes and moves us to question what we may have learned through our upbringing in a certain faith. Like the death of Christ, the idea of a God who suffers today goes against the image of a Lord who has conquered all. In Christ’s time it was believed that the Messiah would be a great warrior. Instead, he was a man born in a manger, killed on a wooden cross.

When the Lisbon earthquake struck, people were shocked by the natural forces at play. Yet, Voltaire and others noticed how the design of the city exacerbated the death toll. Today, society is shocked by the human forces that have accelerated natural disasters and the human actions that have a role in violent episodes. An awareness of humankind’s role in disasters is becoming more and more apparent.

As health care providers, our ministry is at the forefront of these events. Our emergency departments fill with those harmed by the firing of bullets or injured during the destruction of wildfires.

Nurses and physicians may feel an overriding sense of despair as the influx of patients does not wane, but instead continues like a steady river. Perhaps our society is condemned to continue bearing these disasters. At times it can even feel like perhaps the God in whom we seek salvation has forgotten his people.

Disasters, both of natural and human-made causes, seem incomprehensible to our rational minds. When we mix the circumstances with a God that has the power to prevent them and chooses not to, our faith may stumble. Yet, if instead of a God outside the violence and the destruction, our God is one who sits with the victims, perhaps we can begin to see the irrationality of the event for what it is—a symptom of our fallen and incomplete world. People of faith yearn for the coming Kingdom of God.

David Bentley Hart, an American theologian and philosopher, finishes his book, *The Doors of the Sea*, with a passage that I believe responds to our collective yearning for an answer.<sup>2</sup> Hart recognizes that through Christ's death on the cross, our God has a connection to human suffering:

Now we are able to rejoice that we are saved not through the immanent mechanisms of history and nature, but by grace;

that God will not unite all of history's many strands in one great synthesis, but will judge much of history false and damnable; that he will not simply reveal the sublime logic of fallen nature, but will strike off the fetters in which creation languishes; and that, rather than showing us how the tears of a small girl suffering in the dark were necessary for the building of the Kingdom, he will instead raise her up and wipe away all tears from her eyes — and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain, for the former things will have passed away, and he that sits upon the throne will say, "Behold, I make all things new."

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#### NOTES

1. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006).
2. David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 104.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Nathaniel Blanton Hibner, director of ethics at the Catholic Health Association, discusses disasters in light of the problem of evil and suffering in a world created by a loving God. Disasters, he points out, shake the core of our beliefs in our fellow humans and in the goodness and power of a God who loves us. Disasters disturb and distress us personally, but they also expose belief systems and cultural contexts to new scrutiny by theologians, philosophers, scientists and world leaders.

1. Once the scale of a disaster has been realized and emergency measures taken, how do you deal with the human toll, the suffering around you and the knowledge that you can only do so much?

2. Sometimes disasters seem more to do with evil, as in a mass shooting, and sometimes they have more to do with suffering, as in hurricanes that wreak havoc in people's lives. How do you reconcile your personal beliefs with the work needs to be done? Does blame directed at bad actors get in the way? Does shame about not being prepared, survivor guilt, or not being able to do more affect your ability to do what you can?

3. Hibner says that while we have not solved the questions of evil and suffering, we may have made progress in our understanding of God. Rather than a punitive God who rains down suffering, or an indifferent God who tolerates human sin and pain, we may be coming to know a compassionate God who suffers with us. How does this align or challenge your view of God? Talk about what you think of that.

4. What does your ministry do to care for staff when disaster strikes? What kinds of pastoral care are offered to the victims of disaster who end up in your facilities? What services does your ministry offer to the community at large? Is there more as an anchor institution you think it could be doing?

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