



What Should We Be Doing Now?

Some Biblical Reflections: A Message to the Church in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: *Ajith Fernando is the Country Director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka. Here he has kindly let us publish a paper he wrote to the Church in Sri Lanka, to his fellow believers. It was what he felt was God's challenge to them in the midst of the crisis. It was not something he sat down and thought long and hard about as you can read below. I will let him tell it in his own words:*

"On January 3 we had our first day at work in office which was a staff prayer day. I was to speak and struggled till 2.00 a.m. about what to speak, ending up with a message which I thought was appropriate. In the morning when I was praying and preparing for the day I felt it was not Ok so I prepared another message. Then I felt that too was not correct. I left for the 15 minute drive to the meeting place with my daughter and told her, I have nothing to speak about, but I think God will help me. I suddenly got some thoughts in the van and when the staff were having their time of praise I jotted them down. I think the Lord blessed it. A friend told me I should write something to help the church at this time. And I am a guy who normally spends hours and hours preparing a talk!!"

Christians share with their fellow-countrymen the pain of this hour. We look to the Bible for strength and guidance, and find that it has much to say to us. Here are some reflections from Scripture which we present to the Christian community in Sri Lanka.

A Time to Mourn

The Bible says, there is "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Eccles. 3:4). This is a time to weep and mourn. There are very important sections in the Bible called laments. Some of the laments are by individuals who have suffered. Others are by individuals who love their nation and mourn over the suffering of the nation. There is a whole book in the Bible, "Lamentations," devoted to mourning for the sufferings of the nation.

Jeremiah cried, "Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (Jer. 9:1). He wanted to weep because of the pain in his soul. What Jeremiah said after that shows that the weeping would help bring healing to his soul. As we struggle with pain over our nation, expressing our sorrow will help release the pressure and help us become more useful to our people.

This is what happened to Nehemiah. When he heard about the sorry state that Jerusalem was in, he wept and mourned and fasted and prayed for days until the king noticed that his face showed the signs deep sorrow. But after the period of mourning he got down to action and became a national hero and a leader whose leadership style is almost 2500 years later still used as a great example of brilliant leadership.

In the Bible we find several expressions of mourning like fasting (2 Sam. 1:12), and putting on sackcloth (Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 3:31) and ashes (Esth. 4:1-3; Jer. 6:26; 25:34). We need to find ways that fit our culture to express mourning. Certainly fasting and prayer for the nation is most desired at this time, so are cultural expressions like hoisting white flags.

Possibly because Protestant Christianity first came to Sri Lanka through the efforts of missionaries from Western Europe, who usually do not express their emotions very publicly, Protestant Christians do not have much of a tradition of expressions of mourning. When Dorcas died and Peter went to her house, “All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them” (Acts 9:39). This type of scene is very common in Sri Lankan funerals but not in Protestant funerals. We need to think seriously about how we can bring in to our churches expressions of mourning that are in line with the biblical understanding of lament.

A Time to Ask, Why?

Grappling with God’s Sovereignty. An aspect of biblical lament is asking why the terrible things happened. The Bible encourages us to grapple with this question by giving examples of great saints who did this. It even mentions how holy people of God like Job struggled a long time to make sense of what was happening around them. Usually at the end of this grappling God’s people affirm that the sovereign God knows what is happening, and therefore the wisest thing is to keep trusting God. Believing in God’s sovereignty at a time of tragedy helps us to avoid hopelessness amidst this struggle. We must believe that even out of this God will bring something good.

This perspective of God’s sovereignty may not come at once. Therefore it is necessary for us to grapple with God in prayer and meditate on his Word (Psa. 27), even though we may be very busy recovering from the problem or serving those who have been adversely affected by it. This is why we must always continue worshipping God however serious the situation may be. When we worship we focus on those eternal realities which give us the strength to trust God to look after us, and to launch out into sacrificial service.

Groaning with Creation. We must remember that after sin entered the world, the universe lost its equilibrium (Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:20). Therefore natural disasters will happen until God brings into being a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). Paul says that “the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Rom. 8:22). Those who know Christ also join in this groaning (Rom. 8:23).

Christians must learn how to groan. If we don’t learn this lesson, when there are problems in the place where God has called us to serve, we will run away from God’s will and go to a safer place. So as our nation groans over the tsunami, we also groan. Part of our groaning would be asking God why such a thing happened, even though deep down we have the confidence that God is in control of history.

A God Who Groans. One of the most amazing things about the biblical teaching about God is that while we groan, he groans with us (Rom. 8:26). God is not so distant from us as to not feel our pain. The Bible says he laments and mourns for people who do not even acknowledge him (Isa. 16:11; Jer. 48:31). How different to the common idea of God is the statement that when Israel is distressed God is also distressed (Isa. 63:9).

God’s groaning should not surprise us, for we find that when Jesus, who is God, lived on earth he also groaned over the pain of this world. He wept over Jerusalem because of their stubbornness and the punishment that would come for it (Luke 19:41-44) and also wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus as he joined with the others who were weeping there (John 11:33-35). We therefore can conclude that God is weeping with the weeping people of Sri Lanka. How strong a reason is there here for us also to weep. Of course, because God weeps with us it becomes so much easier for us to accept the comfort that he offers to us (see below).

Is this a Judgement? One question we ask is whether this terrible calamity is a judgment from God. Some are even saying that this is a judgement against those who have persecuted Christians. Serious doubt would be placed on the reliability of such a claim when we realise that thousands of wonderful Christians were killed along with the others in our nation. When Jesus came to the world he suffered just like other humans do. Therefore those who follow him also need to suffer with their people. This is one of those times, and it is our privilege to count Christians among those who suffer in our nation because of the tsunami. We are united with our people in their grief.

Jesus, commenting on two disasters that took place during his time, said that such should not be taken as a judgement against those who suffered but should be a warning to us that unless we repent we will face more serious consequences (Luke 13:1-5). In the same way events like this sober us and remind us how vulnerable we are. They should lead us to bow in humble submission to the God who is over all, even over nature.

We must remember that most of the statements about judgement in the Bible are directed to the people of God and only a very few to those outside God's covenant community. We know that people will be judged for their rebellion against God. And we must do all we can to save them from that judgement. But it may be dangerous for us to say that this particular event is a judgement upon our enemies. It would be much safer for us to concentrate on following the clear biblical commands to pray for (Matt. 5:22) and to bless (Rom. 12:14) those who persecute us.

I have heard some Christians express with some sense of triumph that God has hit those nations that hit him. To them I would say that in the Bible God even suffers over the people whom he punishes (Isa. 16:9; Jer. 48:32-36; Hos. 11:8-9). So even if this is a punishment from God we should be mourning for our people and not talking as if a victory was won.

One way we will bless our those who hurt us is to do all we can to prepare them and all people to stand before their maker at the coming judgement. Today people are asking why we were not warned if some people knew that the tsunami was coming. May we not be guilty of not warning people of the coming judgement.

God's People Help Alleviate Suffering. This is not a time for us to be pointing accusatory fingers at others. In fact we may not even be able to give a fully clear answer as to why this happened. But in the Bible a key aspect of the answer to the problem of suffering is that God's people become active in alleviating suffering (Ezek. 18:7-8; Matt. 10:42; Matt. 25:35-46; Jas. 1:27). This is a time for action. And, because we are strengthened by God's love (2 Cor. 5:14) and empowered by the Spirit (Acts 1:8) we are uniquely equipped to have a huge impact upon our nation. This should be our primary focus right now.

A Time to Work

So it is a time for Christians to work. When the early Christians knew of needs, they immediately got busy meeting those needs (Acts 4:34-37; 11:28-30). In keeping with this practice Christians have been in the forefront of relief operations right through history.

Paul's exhortation to Timothy about his usual Christian service is very appropriate for this extreme situation of need that we live in. He is asked to, "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:3). This is our call too as we live in a suffering nation. This is a time for Christians to suffer by serving their nation. There are different types of suffering here.

Sometimes the suffering is less overt. For example, a wife may need to release her husband to work extra hard at relief operations. This is usually difficult on the marriage. But realising that this is something that is being done for God will help reduce the pain and take away resentment over it.

In the verses that follow Paul explains how Timothy should take on his share of suffering. He says, "No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits" (2:4). We may have to give up what others consider normal needs in order to serve our people at this time. Extreme situations call for extreme solutions. Our families must be told that we all will have to pay a price if we are going to serve our nation at this time. According to Paul another aspect of the price we pay is working hard like a "hard-working farmer" (2:6). These days there are many Christians who are very tired. This is inevitable because our nation is faced with such a serious emergency. So, this is a time for us to suffer for our country, to work hard, to give up some things we are used to having so that those who have nothing would be helped.

Not to work at this time could be a serious error. Amos pronounces woe to those who are living at ease and having fun while their nation is in a crisis (Amos 6:1-6). David fell into sin at a time that the kings went out to war but he was at home (2 Sam 11:1). May Christians be found doing all they can to serve our nation at this needy time.

In verses 8 to 13 Paul tells Timothy about the blessings that will come if he suffers in the service of God. One day we will see that all the personal sacrifices we made were worthwhile; that as the Bible promised the last have become first (Luke 13:30). This is why we are not too upset when others get the credit for what we do. This is why we are willing to do things that don't seem to bring us any earthly reward. Strengthened by the knowledge that we have such a reward, and by the fact that we are princes and princesses in God's great kingdom, we have the strength to do things that others are not willing to do. No work is too small for us, for God gives us the strength to be servants. It may be cleaning toilets or dressing festered wounds; it may be clearing garbage. We not only have the strength to do these things, we regard doing them to be a great privilege.

A Time to Pray

The most powerful work that a Christian can do is to pray. In Paul's thinking effective intercessory prayer was hard work (Col. 4:12-13). In Old Testament times when the nation faced a crisis, godly leaders called the nation to prayer, often with fasting. Fasting took place in times of national calamities (2 Sam. 1:12). When a great multitude of foreign invaders came against King Jehoshaphat, the first thing we are told is that he "was afraid." But immediately after that he "set his face to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah" (2 Chron. 20:3). We would have expected him to rally his army and prepare them for war. Instead he proclaimed a fast and gathered the nation to pray. The result was a resounding victory through God's own intervention.

However busy we are, prayer alone and in community should be an important aspect of our relief operations. We believe this is the time for Christian leaders to call their people to special seasons of prayer and fasting. Here are some things that we should be praying about:

- for God's grace to go to those who have suffered loss of loved ones and property; that those who are deeply traumatised would be ministered to and that those who are displaced from their homes would find a solution to their housing problems;

- that those who are in camps would be adequately provided for, and that those who are vulnerable to attack from wicked people, like women and children, would be protected;
- that Christians will arise and be sacrificially involved in effective service at this time;
- that the church would be revived to truly bring glory to God through our actions and our witness to Christ;
- that God would guide each one of us individually about how we are going to be involved in the process of the healing of our land;
- for the process of relief and rehabilitation; for groups involved in this, especially Christian organisations and churches, and for the government authorities who are responsible for administering the affected areas;
- that corruption, waste and a lack of planning that can hamper relief operations would be minimised;
- for our political leaders who make policies that affect the healing process;
- that there would be adequate supplies and funding for the huge task of restoring the nation;
- that through this tragedy peace would be restored to our nation; and
- that God's glory would shine through to our nation as it has never been before.

A Time to Give

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

This is the time for the people of God to give of their possessions to help those who have suffered. Paul says that we have a special responsibility towards those of "the household of faith" that is, towards the members of our spiritual family (Gal. 6:10). But our giving must go beyond our spiritual family to others who are needy.

As large sums of money and supplies are coming from abroad we may think that we ourselves do not need to give because our gifts will be minute in comparison to what comes from abroad. But we must remember that in the Bible the power of a gift does not depend on the amount of money given. Though the widow gave only a very small amount to money to the temple offering, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box" (Mark 12:43).

We need to encourage our people to give and show them how even their small gifts could have great power when God works through them. We need to give specific instructions on how people can give, where the gifts should be brought to and when. Paul did this when motivating the Corinthians to give for the Jerusalem fund. He spent a considerable space in 2 Corinthians to appeal to them to get involved in this fund (2 Cor. 8-9). He also presented some clear plans about how the offerings could be made and how this fund was going to be administered (1 Cor. 16:1-4).

A Time to Plan

The last reference to Paul's plans for the fund shows that the taking in and the disbursement of gifts should not be haphazard. This principle would apply to the relief and rehabilitation process too. Proverbs says that wars need to be waged with proper plans and advice so that the wisest strategies are adopted (Prov. 20:18, 24:6). This would apply to the war on the need of our people that we are now engaged in. So much time, energy and resources are wasted due to lack of planning. So many needy people miss the aid they should get and some get more than they need because of poor planning.

Planning is especially needed as we move out of the stage where we meet emergency needs and start the reconstruction process. It would be wise for smaller groups to partner with others. This is a wonderful opportunity for us to demonstrate the unity we share in Christ by joining with other churches and groups. Churches are particularly gifted with willing and able people, and that could be an important resource to give to specialist groups who have the funds and the expertise for relief and rehabilitation but not enough people. This is one of those situations where the principle of Ecclesiastes 4:9 is true: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil" (Eccles. 4:9). Most of us are not equipped or knowledgeable enough to do the best job here. So it would be wise for us to partner with others.

This may be also a time for us to show our commitment to our nation as we join with other groups, not connected with the church, to help in their programmes. We are citizens of two worlds. And all we do in both worlds we do for God and for his glory (1 Cor. 10:31). So even the jobs we do in secular institutions we do primarily for God. We consider that job important because it goes to serve the community where God has placed us as his witnesses. The same principle applies when we serve the community through relief and rehabilitation projects organised by neighbourhood groups or the government. We should look for opportunities to join with our neighbours so that we could represent Christ through our involvement in their projects.

A Time to Be Careful

In the passage where Paul urges Timothy to work hard, he also urges him to be like "an athlete" who "competes according to the rules" (2 Tim. 2:5). When one is running hard it is easy to stumble and fall. It is sadly true that many who have worked hard at relief have made some big mistakes by breaking some basic rules that must not be broken. So, when doing relief, we must ensure that we follow the basic rules of Christianity and of Christian service. For example, in exceptional times like this we may miss our time alone with God or with our spouses once or twice. But such omissions must not be permitted to go on for too long.

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

Often these excesses result in a loss of joy, and we cease to behave like Christians because joy is one of the most basic qualities of a Christian (Gal. 5:22). This joy is what gives us the strength (Neh. 8:10) to keep serving God however tough it may be. Sometimes we may be weeping for the sorrow of what has happened, but deep down we have the joy of the Lord in our lives. This is because amidst the sorrow we are walking close to him.

One of the sad facts of the history of relief work is that many sexual and other sins have been committed by relief workers and many of their families have been seriously damaged as a consequence of their work. Many workers have been burned out and could never do such work again. This is time for us to “keep a close watch on [ourselves]” (1 Tim. 4:16). People tend to get careless when they are tired. They can be taken off guard at such times. For example, it is well known that tired people lose their temper quickly. So we need to be particularly careful about our personal lives when we are tired.

We also need to be careful about our professional behaviour at this time. We are warned that if we work in ways displeasing to God our work will be considered useless by God and be burned away and destroyed at the final judgement (1 Cor. 3:12-15). Here are some professional errors we need to be careful about.

- We must take care that we do not exaggerate about what we are doing, or use our reporting to bring glory to ourselves. The glory from what we do belongs to God alone (Psa. 115:1; Isa. 48:11). We constantly need to be alert to the possibility of straying into actions that are aimed at bringing glory to ourselves and our organisations.
- We must also be careful about the way we use the funds we receive. Even though there is a lot of work to do urgently we must not break the principles of accounting considered acceptable in our nation. Sadly, many frauds have been committed during relief operations and some of these began as errors in procedures by well-meaning individuals.
- We are living at a time of great need, and large funds have come in to meet those needs. We would be greatly tempted to spend some of those funds for luxury items and expenditure for ourselves. The extravagant lifestyles of some relief workers today are a scandal, and Christians must have nothing to do with things that look like that. It is only in that way that we can truly identify with the suffering masses of Sri Lanka.

A Time for Comfort and for The God of Comfort

Paul describes God as the “God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor. 1:3-4). With so many people traumatised, sad and needing someone to listen to them, those who have received God’s comfort can do much to be agents of healing. Even relief workers are in need of comfort today. What they have experienced is emotionally very draining. So Christians should be looking for opportunities to comfort people.

Our role may often be simply being with and listening to hurting people. With the wounds so severe, people may not be in a position to listen to us. Like Jesus left heaven and came alongside us we too may be called to leave our places of comfort in order to be close to our suffering people. We should note that some fairly extreme reactions like great fear, withdrawal and silence, anger, sleeplessness, shock, and crying are normal human responses to tragedies of this sort. In most cases these symptoms will pass with time. Therefore we should try to be understanding and reluctant to come to quick judgements about their behaviour. All this is part of Christ-like incarnational ministry.

The greatest need of people is to have a relationship with this "God of all comfort." We must not lose sight of the need of people to receive God's salvation. However we must remember that God never manipulates people into accepting his message. He reasons with people about his way of salvation (Isa. 1:18). We must therefore be careful to ensure that people do not accept God simply because they received aid from Christians. They should accept God because they believe in their hearts and minds that, through Jesus, God has provided the answer to their deepest needs.

This is a crucial time in the life of our nation. We love our nation and long for its welfare. Let us Christians be faithful in sacrificially serving our nation.

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