

During the term when I was teaching my class on the problem of suffering at Rutgers in 1985, one of those unthinkable natural disasters occurred that made headline news and disturbed all caring people around the world. The night before there had been a volcanic incident in Columbia that caused a mudslide that wiped out several villages, killing thousands of people in their sleep. The death toll in the end was 23,000, men women and children.

Some people blamed the Columbian government - they shouldn't have allowed these villages to be near a volcano. Fair enough I suppose. You have to blame *someone*. And who can blame a volcano? But why do disasters like this have to happen in the first place? And how do people who believe in the God of the Bible account for such things? Blaming government officials for a volcanic eruption seems a bit lame. And it didn't occur to most of us at the time, as we were reading accounts in the papers. Instead, our reactions were "Oh my God! Why do things like this *happen*????"

As you might expect, I raised the issue with the students in my class. Most of the "explanations" for suffering in the Bible really didn't seem to work very well. Could you say that God had allowed such a thing to happen in order to punish people? That, as I've said, is a very common view in much of the Bible - it's a constant refrain on page after page after page in the Hebrew Bible especially.

But really? Who...

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