

Español
Northwest Nazarene University

The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 129

Charles Wesley

The Cause And Cure Of Earthquakes

First published in the year 1750.

"O come hither, and behold the works of the Lord; what destruction he hath brought upon the earth!"
Ps. 46:8.

Of all the judgments which the righteous God inflicts on sinners here, the most dreadful and destructive is an earthquake. This he has lately brought on our part of the earth, and thereby alarmed our fears, and bid us "prepare to meet our God!" The shocks which have been felt in divers places, since that which made this city tremble, may convince us that the danger is not over, and ought to keep us still in awe; seeing "his anger is not turned away, but his band is stretched out still." (Isa. 10:4.)

That I may fall in with the design of Providence at this awful crisis, I shall take occasion from the words of my text,

I. To show that earthquakes are the works of the Lord, and He only bringeth this destruction upon the earth:

II. Call you to behold the works of the Lord, in two or three terrible instances: And,

III. Give you some directions suitable to the occasion.

I. I am to show you that earthquakes are the works of the Lord, and He only bringeth this destruction upon the earth. Now, that God is himself the Author, and sin the moral cause, of earthquakes, (whatever the natural cause may be,) cannot be denied by any who believe the Scriptures; for these are they which testify of Him, that it is God" which removeth the mountains, and overturneth them in his anger; which shaketh the earth out of her place, and the pillars thereof tremble." (Job 9:5, 6.) "He looketh on the earth, and it trembleth he toucheth the hills, and they smoke." (Ps. 104:32.) "The hills melted like wax at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth." (Ps. 97:5.) "The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt. Who can stand before his indignation, and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger His fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him." (Nahum 1:5, 6.)

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" (Ps. 18:7.) 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 shalt remove out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of host, and in the day of his fierce anger." (Isa. 13:11, 13.) And again. "Behold, the Lord maketh the earth empty; and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down," (in the original, perverteth 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.)

Nothing can be more express than these scripture testimonies, which determine both the cause and author of this terrible calamity. But reason, as well as faith, doth sufficiently assure us it must be the punishment of sin, and the effect of that curse which was brought upon the earth by the original transgression. Steadfastness must be no longer looked for in the world, since innocency is banished thence: But we cannot conceive that the universe would have been disturbed by these furious accidents during the state of original righteousness. Wherefore should God's anger have armed the elements against his faithful subjects Wherefore should he have overthrown all his works to destroy innocent men or why overwhelmed the inhabitants of the earth with the ruins thereof, if they had not been sinful why buried those in the bowels of the earth who were not to die Let us then conclude, both from Scripture and reason, that earthquakes are God's strange works of judgment -- the proper effect and punishment of sin. I proceed,

II. To set before you these works of the Lord in two or three terrible instances.

In the year 1692 there happened in Sicily one of the most dreadful earthquakes in all history. It shook the whole island and not only that, but Naples and Malta shared in the shock. It was impossible for any one to keep on their legs on the dancing earth: Nay, those who lay on the ground were tossed from side to side, as on a rolling billow. High walls leaped from their foundations several paces.

The mischief it did is amazing: Fifty-four cities and towns, besides an incredible number of villages, were almost entirely destroyed. Catania, one of the most famous, ancient, and flourishing cities in the kingdom, the residence of several monarchs, and an university, had the greatest share in the judgment. Father Anth. Serrvoita, being on his way thither, a few miles from the city observed a black cloud like night hovering over it; and there arose from the mouth of Etna great spires of flame, which spread all around. The sea, all on a sudden, began to roar, and rise in billows; the birds flew about astonished; the cattle ran crying in the fields; and there was a blow as if all the artillery in the world had been discharged at once!

His and his companions' horses stopped short, trembling; so that they were forced to alight. They were no sooner off; but they were lifted from the ground above two palms; when, casting his eyes towards Catania, he was astonished to see nothing but a thick cloud of dust in the air. This was the scene of their calamity; for of the magnificent Catania there is not the least footstep to be seen. Of eighteen thousand nine hundred and fourteen inhabitants, eighteen thousand perished therein: In the several cities and towns sixty thousand were destroyed out of two hundred and fifty-four thousand nine hundred!

In the same year, 1692, on June 7, was the earthquake in Jamaica. It threw down most of the houses, churches, sugar-works, mills, and bridges throughout the island; tore the rocks and mountains, reducing some of them to plains ; destroyed whole plantations, and threw them into the sea; and, in two minutes time, shook down and destroyed nine-tenths of the town of Port Royal; the houses sunk outright thirty or forty fathom deep!

The earth, opening, swallowed up people; and they rose in other streets; some in the midst of the harbour, (being driven up again by the sea which rose in those breaches,) and so wonderfully escaped.

Of all wells, from one fathom to six or seven, the water flew out of the top with a vehement motion. While the houses on one side of the street were swallowed up, on the other they were thrown into heaps. The sand in the street rose like waves of the sea, lifting up every body that stood on it, and immediately dropping down into pits; and at the same instant, a flood of water, breaking in, rolled them over and over, while catching hold of beams and rafters to save themselves.

Ships and sloops in the harbour were overset and lost. A vessel, by the motion of the sea and sinking of the wharf, was driven over the tops of many houses, and sunk there.

The earthquake was attended with a hollow rumbling sound, like that of thunder. In less than a minute, three quarters of the houses, and the ground they stood on, with the inhabitants, were quite sunk under water, and the little part left behind was no better than a heap of rubbish!

The shock was so violent that it threw people down on their knees or their faces, as they were running about for shelter; the ground heaved and swelled like a rolling sea; and several houses, still standing were shuffled and moved some yards out of their places; a whole street is said to be twice as broad now as before.

In many places the earth would crack, and open and shut quick and fast, of which openings, two or three hundred might be seen at a time; in some whereof the people were swallowed up; others the closing earth caught by the middle, and squeezed to death; and in that manner they were left buried with only their heads above ground; some heads the dogs ate!

The Minister of the place, in his account, saith, that such was the desperate wickedness of the people, that he was afraid to continue among them; that on the day of the earthquake some sailors and others fell to breaking open and rifling warehouses, and houses deserted, while the earth trembled under them, and the houses fell upon them in the act; that he met many swearing and blaspheming; and that the common harlots, who remained still upon the place, were as drunken and impudent as ever.

While he was running towards the Fort, a wide open place, to save himself, he saw the earth open and swallow up a multitude of people; and the sea mounting in upon them over the fortifications, it likewise destroyed their large burying-place, and washed away the carcasses out of their graves, dashing their tombs to pieces. The whole harbour was covered with dead bodies, floating up and down without burial!

As soon as the violent shock was over, he desired all people to join with him in prayer. Among them were several Jews, who kneeled and answered as they did, and were heard even to call upon Jesus Christ. After he had spent an hour and an half with them in prayer, and exhortations to repentance, he was desired to retire to some ship in the harbour, and, passing over the tops of some houses which lay level with) the water, got first into a canoe, and then into a long-boat, which put him on board a ship.

The larger openings swallowed up houses; and out of some would issue whole rivers of water, spouted up a great height into the air, and threatening a deluge to that part which the earthquake spared. The whole was attended with offensive smells, and the noise of falling mountains. The sky in a minutes time was turned dull and red, like a glowing oven. Scarce a planting-house or sugar-work was left standing in all Jamaica. A great part of them was swallowed up, houses, trees, people, and all at one gape; in the place of which afterwards appeared great pools of water, which, when dried up, left nothing but sand, without any mark that ever tree or plant had been thereon.

About twelve miles from the sea, the earth gaped, and spouted out, with a prodigious force, vast quantities of water into the air. But the greatest violence was among the mountains and rocks. Most of the rivers were stopped for twenty-four hours, by the falling of the mountains; till, swelling up, they made themselves new channels, tearing up trees, and all they met with, in their passage.

A great mountain split, and fell into the level ground, and covered several settlements, and destroyed the people there. Another mountain, having made several leaps or moves, overwhelmed [a] great part of a plantation lying a mile off. Another large high mountain, near a day's journey over, was quite swallowed up, and where it stood is now a great lake some leagues over.

After the great shake, those who escaped got on board ships in the harbour, where many continued above two months; the shakes all that time being so violent, and coming so thick, sometimes two or three in an hour, accompanied with frightful noises, like a ruffling wind, or a hollow rumbling thunder, with brimstone blasts, that they durst not come ashore. The consequence of the earthquake was, a general sickness from the noisome vapours, which swept away above three thousand persons.

On the 28th of October, 1746, half an hour past ten at night, Lima, the capital city of Peru, was destroyed by an earthquake, which extended an hundred leagues northward and as many more to the south, all along the sea-coast. The destruction did not so much as give time for fright; for, at one and the same instant, the noise, the shock, and the ruin were perceived. In the space of four minutes, during which the greatest force of the earthquake lasted, some found themselves buried under the ruins of the falling houses; and others crushed to death in the streets by the tumbling of the walls, which fell upon them as they ran here and there.

Nevertheless, the greater part of the inhabitants (who were computed near sixty thousand) were providentially preserved, either in the hollow places which the ruins left, or on the top of the very ruins themselves, without knowing how they got up thither. For no person, at such a season, had time for deliberation; and supposing he had, there was no place of retreat: For the parts which seemed most firm sometimes proved the weakest; on the contrary the weakest, at intervals, made the greatest resistance; and the consternation was such, that no one thought himself secure, till he had made his escape out of the city.

The earth struck against the buildings with such violence, that every shock beat down the greatest part of them; and these, tearing along with them vast weights in their fall, (especially the churches and high houses,) completed the destruction of everything they encountered with, even of what the earthquake had spared. The shocks, although instantaneous, were yet successive; and at intervals men were transported from one place to another, which was the means of safety to some, while the utter impossibility of moving preserved others.

There were seventy-four churches, besides chapels, and fourteen monasteries, with as many more hospitals and infirmaries, which were in all instant reduced to a ruinous heap, and their immense riches buried in the earth! But though scarce twenty houses were left standing, yet it does not appear that the number of the dead amounted to much more than one thousand one hundred and forty-one persons; seventy of whom were patients in an hospital, who were buried by the roof falling upon them as they lay in their beds, no person being able to give them any assistance.

Callao, a sea-port town, two leagues distant from Lima, was swallowed up by, the sea in the same earthquake. It vanished out of sight in a moment; so that not the least sight of it now appears.

Some few towers, indeed, and the strength of its walls, for a time, endured the whole force of the earthquake: But scarcely had its poor inhabitants begun to recover their first fright which the dreadful ruin had occasioned, when, suddenly, the sea began to swell, and, rising to a prodigious height, rushed furiously forward, and overflowed, with so vast a deluge of water, its ancient bounds, that, foundering most of the ships which were at anchor in the port, and lifting the rest above the height of the walls and towers, it drove them on and left them on dry ground far beyond the town. At the same time, it tore up from the foundations everything therein of houses and buildings, excepting the two gates, and here and there some small fragments of the walls themselves, which, as registers of the calamity, are still to be seen among the ruins and the waters, -- a dreadful monument of what they were!

In this raging flood were drowned all the inhabitants of the place, about five thousand persons. Such as could lay hold on any pieces of timber, floated about for a considerable time; but those fragments, for want of room, were continually striking against each other, and so beat off those who had clung to them.

About two hundred, mostly fishermen and sailors, saved themselves. They declared that the waves in their retreat surrounded the whole town, without leaving any means for preservation; and that, in the intervals, when the violence of the inundation was a little abated, they heard the most mournful cries and shrieks of those who perished. Those, likewise, who were on board the ships, which, by the elevation of the sea, were carried quite over the town, had the opportunity of escaping. Of twenty-three ships in the port at the time of the earthquake, four were stranded, and all the rest foundered. The few persons who saved themselves upon planks were several times driven about as far as the island of St. Lawrence, more than two leagues from the fort. At last some of them were cast upon the sea-shore, others upon the island, and so were preserved.

In these instances we may behold and see the works of the Lord, and how "terrible he is in his doings toward the children of me." (Ps. 66:5.) Indeed, nothing can be so affecting as this judgment of earthquakes when it comes unexpectedly as a thief in the night; -- "when hell enlarges herself, and open her mouth without measure; and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, descent into it;" (Isa. 5:14;) -- when there is no time to flee, or method to escape, or possibility to resist; -- when no sanctuary or refuge remains; no shelter is to be found in the highest towers or lowest caverns; -- when the earth opens on a sudden, and becomes the grave of whole families, streets, and cities; and effects this in less time than you are able to tell the story of it; either sending out a flood of waters to drown, or vomiting out flames of fire to consume them, or closing again upon them, that they die by suffocation or famine, if not by the ruins of their own dwelling; -- when parents and children, husbands and wives, masters and servants, magistrates, Ministers, and people, without distinction, in the midst of health, and peace, and business, are buried in a common ruin, and pass all together into the eternal world: and there is only the difference of a few hours or minutes between a famous city and none at all!

Now, if war be a terrible evil, how much more an earthquake, which, in the midst of peace, brings a worse evil than the extremity of war! If a raging pestilence be dreadful, which sweeps away thousands in a day, and ten thousands in a night; if a consuming fire be an amazing judgment; how much more astonishing is this, whereby houses, and inhabitants, towns, and cities, and countries, are all destroyed at one stroke in a few minutes! Death is the only presage of such a judgment, without giving leisure to prepare for another world, or opportunity to look for any shelter in this.

For a man to feel the earth, which hangeth upon nothing, (but as some vast ball in the midst of a thin

yielding air,) totter under him, must fill him with secret fright and confusion. History informs us of the fearful effects of earthquakes in all ages; where you may see rocks torn in pieces; mountains not cast down only, but removed; hills raised, not out of valleys only, but out of seas; fires breaking out of waters; stones and cinders belched up; rivers changed; seas dislodged; earth opening; towns swallowed up; and many such-like hideous events!

Of all divine animadversions, there is none more horrid, more inevitable, than this. For where can we think to escape danger, if the most solid thing in all the world shakes? If that which sustains all other things threaten us with sinking under our feet, what sanctuary shall we find from an evil that encompasses us about? And whither can we withdraw, if the gulfs which open themselves shut up our passages on every side?

With what horror are men struck when they hear the earth groan; when her trembling succeeds her complaints; when houses are loosened from their foundations; when the roofs fall upon their heads, and the pavement sinks under their feet! What hope, when fear cannot be fenced by flight! In other evils there is some way to escape; but an earthquake incloses what it overthrows, and wages war with whole provinces; and sometimes leaves nothing behind it to inform posterity of its outrages. More insolent than fire, which spares rocks; more cruel than the conqueror, who leaves walls; more greedy than the sea, which vomits up shipwrecks; it swallows and devours whatsoever it overturns. The sea itself is subject to its empire, and the most dangerous storms are those occasioned by earthquakes.

I come, in the Third and last place, to give you some directions suitable to the occasion. And this is the more needful, because ye know not how soon the late earthquake, wherewith God hath visited us, may return, or whether He may not enlarge as well as repeat its commission. Once, yea, twice, hath the Lord warned us, that he is arisen to shake terribly the earth. Wherefore, 1. Fear God, even that God can in a moment cast both body and soul into hell! "Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty." (Isa. 1:10.) Ought we not all to cry out, "Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty! Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name for thy judgments are made manifest!" (Rev. 15:3, 4.)

God speaks to your hearts, as in subterranean thunder, "The Lord's voice crieth unto the city, -- Hear the rod, and who hath appointed it." (Mic. 6:9.) He commands you to take notice of his power and justice. "Come and see!" (Rev. 6:5,) while a fresh seal is opening; yea, "come and see the works of God; his is terrible in his doings towards the children of men." (Ps. 66:5.)

When he makes the mountains tremble, and the earth shake, shall not our hearts be moved? "Fear ye not me saith the Lord; and will ye not tremble at my presence" (Jer. 5:22.) Will ye not fear me, who can open the windows of heaven above, or break up the fountains of the deep below, and pour forth whole floods of vengeance when I please -- who can "rain upon the wicked snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest;" (Ps. 11:6;) or kindle those streams and exhalations in the bowels and caverns of the earth, and make them force their way to the destruction of towns, cities, and countries who can thus suddenly turn a fruitful land into a barren wilderness; an amazing spectacle of desolation and ruin.

"Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it." "The lion hath roared; who will not fear? With God is terrible majesty; men do therefore fear him." Some do; and all ought. O that his fear might this moment fall upon all you who hear these words; constraining every one of you to cry out, "My flesh trembleth for fear of thee; and I am afraid of thy judgments!" (Ps. 109:10.) O that all might see, now His hand is lifted up, as in act to

strike; is stretched out still; and shakes his rod over a guilty land, a people fitted for destruction! For is not this the nation to be visited And "shall not I wait for these things saith the Lord; and shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this" (Jer. 5:9.) What but national repentance can prevent national destruction

"O consider this, ye that forget God, lest he pluck you away, and there be none to deliver you!" (Ps. 50:22.) That iniquity may not be your ruin, repent! This is the Second advice I would offer you; or, rather, the First enforced upon you farther, and explained. Fear God, and depart from evil; repent, and bring forth fruits meet for repentance; break off our sins this moment. " Wash ye, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well," saith the Lord. (Isa. :16, 17.)

"Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." (Luke 13:3.) "Therefore now, saith the Lord," who is not willing any should perish, "turn ye unto me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him" (Joel 2:12-14.)

"Who knoweth" A question which should make you tremble. God is weighing you in the balance, and, as it were, considering whether to save or to destroy! "Say unto the children of Israel, Ye are a stiff-necked people: I will come up into the midst of thee in a moment, and consume thee; therefore now put off thy ornaments from thee, that I may know what to do unto thee." (Exod. 33:5.)

God waits to see what effect his warnings will have upon you. He pauses on the point of executing judgment, and cries, "How shall I give thee up" (Hos. 11:8) Or, "Why should ye be stricken any more" (Isa. 1:5.) He hath no pleasure in the death of him that dieth. He would not bring to pass his strange act, unless your obstinate impenitence compel him.

"Why will you die, O house of Israel" (Ezek. 18:31.) God warns you of the approaching judgment, that ye may take warning, and escape it by timely repentance. He lifts up his hand, and shakes it over you, that ye may see it, and prevent the stroke. He tells you, "Now is the axe laid unto the root of the trees:" (Matt. 3:10:) Therefore repent; bring forth good fruit; and ye shall not be hewn down, and cast into the fire. O do not despise the riches of his mercy, but let it lead you to repentance! "Account that the longsuffering of the Lord is salvation." (2 Pet. 3:15.) Harden not your hearts, but turn to Him that smites you; or, rather, threatens to smite, that ye may turn and be spared!

How slow is the Lord to anger! how unwilling to punish! By what leisurely steps does he come to take vengeance! How many lighter afflictions before the final blow!

Should he beckon the man on the red horse to return, and say, "Sword, go through this land;" can we complain he gave us no warning Did not the sword first bereave abroad; and did we not then see it within our borders Yet the merciful God said, "Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further;" he stopped the invaders in the midst of our land, and turned them back again, and destroyed them.

Should he send the man on the pale horse, whose name is Death, and the pestilence destroy thousands and ten thousands of us; can we deny that first he warned us by the raging mortality among our cattle

So, if we provoke him to lay waste our earth, and turn it upside down, and overthrow us, as he

overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah; shall we not have procured this unto ourselves Had we no reason to expect any such calamity; no previous notice; no trembling of the earth before it clave; no shock before it opened its mouth Did he set no examples of so terrible a judgment before our eyes Had we never heard of the destruction of Jamaica, or Catania, or that of Lima, which happened but yesterday If we perish at last, we perish without excuse; for what could have been done more to save us

Yes; thou hast now another call to repentance, another offer of mercy, whosoever thou art that hearest these words. In the name of the Lord Jesus, I warn thee once more, as a watchman over the house of Israel, to flee from the wrath to come! I put thee in remembrance (if thou hast so soon forgotten it) of the late awful judgment, whereby God shook thee over the mouth of hell! Thy body he probably awoke by it; but did he awake thy soul The Lord was in the earthquake, and put a solemn question to thy conscience: "Art thou ready to die" "Is thy peace made with God" Was the earth just now to open its mouth, and swallow thee up, what would become of thee Where wouldest thou be in Abraham's bosom, or lifting up thine eyes in torment Hadst thou perished by the late earthquake, wouldest thou not have died in thy sins, or rather gone down quick into hell Who prevented thy damnation it was the Son of God! O fall down, and worship him! Give Him the glory of thy deliverance; and devote the residue of thy days to his service!

This is the Third advice I would give you: Repent and believe the gospel. Believe on the Lord Jesus, and ye shall yet be saved. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish. Repentance alone will profit you nothing; neither do ye repent, unless ye confess with broken hearts the most damnable of all your sins, your unbelief; your having rejected, or not accepted, Jesus Christ as your only Saviour. Neither can ye repent unless he himself gives the power; unless his Spirit convince you of sin, because ye believe not in Him.

Till ye repent of your unbelief, all your good desires and promises are vain, and will pass away as a morning cloud. The vows which ye make in a time of trouble, ye will forget and break as soon as the trouble is over and the danger past.

But shall ye escape for your wickedness, suppose the earthquake should not return God will never want ways and means to punish impenitent sinners. He hath a thousand other judgments in reserve; and if the earth should not open its mouth, yet ye shall surely at last be swallowed up in the bottomless pit of hell!

Wouldest thou yet escape that eternal death Then receive the sentence of death in thyself, thou miserable self-destroyed sinner! Know thy want of living, saving, divine faith! Groan under thy burden of unbelief, and refuse to be comforted till thou hear Him of his own mouth say, "Be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee."

I cannot take it for granted, that all men have faith; or speak to the sinners of this land as to believers in Jesus Christ. For where are the fruits of faith Faith worketh by love; faith overcometh the world; faith purifieth the heart; faith, in the smallest measure, removeth mountains. If thou canst believe, all things are possible to thee. If thou art justified by faith, thou hast peace with God, and rejoicest in hope of his glorious appearing.

He that believeth hath the witness in himself; hath the earnest of heaven in his heart; hath love stronger than death. Death to a believer has lost its sting; "therefore will he not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea." (Ps. 46:2.) For he knows

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