

Lessons From an Earthquake

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I had just retired for the night when I got the first report of the great Alaskan earthquake. It was Saturday, March 24, 1964, and my wife and I only a few minutes earlier had returned from Montgomery, Alabama, where we attended the Christian Education Convocation, concluding the 22nd annual Alabama Christian College lecture program. While preparing to retire, I turned my transistor radio on and tuned to the nearest strong signal, which happened to be KMOX, St. Louis. They had just given the first report to reach the "South 48" (as we are known in Alaska), of the earthquake. It was 1:00 am. My first concern was for my parents who lived in Juneau, Alaska, where my father, H. W. McClish, Sr., had been preaching since August 1963. Word finally reached us March 30, that all was well in Juneau, for which we gave thanks.

The first reports of the earthquake were alarming enough, but as lines of communication were re-established a story of almost unbelievable tragedy and destruction unfolded. This awful disaster in the far north surely held some lessons for us all.

As soon as the news began to break, lines of communication were almost immediately jammed by people who had loved ones, as did I, in that far-flung frontier. I was told that it would be futile even to try to communicate directly with my parents, for the lines were overtaxed. It is right for us to be so concerned about the physical welfare of kindred and friends. But in all of this concern over bodily safety, how many gave thought to their soul-safety? I fear we are at the point where jeopardy of life stirs more concern in the average person than jeopardy of soul. We would do anything in our power to ensure the physical safety of our kindred, but what are we doing to further their soul-security? Noah is sometimes belittled as a "poor preacher" for saving only eight souls after preaching 120 years. But he saved all his house. How many are doing as well?

Another thing that this tragedy should bring home to us is the transient nature of material things. The city of Anchorage, hardest hit, was said to be "The Pride of Alaska," On the day of the earthquake its merchants were weeping because the places of business they had poured their lives into had been leveled by a five-minute rumbling and rupturing of the earth. It was said that the multi-storied J.C. Penney building, the pride of the city, was rendered unrecognizable. The "permanent" homes that cost \$30,000, \$40,000, \$50,000 and more were

caved off into Cook Inlet along with the pauper's huts. An entire way of life was crushed in five minutes for those whose lives were material-centered. Some Scriptures immediately flood the mind: "By faith he (Abraham) became a sojourner...dwelling in tents...for he looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:9-10). Another demands utterance: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth..." (Mat. 6:19-21).

Most of the people in Alaska probably thought that earthquakes happen to other people, but that they could not happen to them. They very likely knew they were in the "earthquake belt" and had read of the terrible quakes in Japan, Chile, and San Francisco, but those were far distant from them! "It can't happen to us," they thought, but it did! We never cease to be amazed at the number of people who use this attitude as sort of an "escape mechanism" from the warnings of the Bible. Perhaps the classic example of this attitude in the Bible is Eve, who allowed Satan to convince her that what God said would not happen to her (Gen. 3:4). It appears that Noah's generation held this exact view toward the cataclysmic flood that destroyed them. Nadab and Abihu seem to have shared the "it can't happen to us" feeling about God's explicit instructions (Num. 3:4). Witness others such as Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:6), Saul (1 Sam. 15:15), et.al. Think of the graphic example God made out of Ananias and Sapphira when they tried to deceive the Spirit in their offering (Acts 5:1-11). Yet, under the influence of the philosophy, "I've done it before and got by with it," brothers and sisters continue to rob God; If God dealt with the problem now as He did in this case, many of us would not pillow our heads another night. We can read the vivid warning of the universality of the Judgment in 2 Corinthians 5:10 to those who are lost and often the attitude seems to be, "Maybe everyone else will be there, but I will escape somehow." In Rev. 22:18-19 is a warning against tampering with the Divine Word, but the masses continue to play a fast and loose game with it. Such must surely be ignorant of the warnings or else of the disposition that they apply to others, but not to them. Let us be clear. It can and will happen according to the warnings.

No one will argue that this was a great natural disaster. It was months before the full extent of the damage was discovered. Many of the early estimates, enormous enough, have, already been revised upward. It was estimated that 600 may have lost their lives. Estimates of property damage were set at \$350 million. A special act of Congress was required to provide sufficient funds to get Alaska back on its feet. Even the most calloused heart would have to be softened by such ill fortune on his fellowman. Let us be reminded, however, that a greater disaster than this is to be visited upon our planet. "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief

in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat; and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2 Pet 3:10). Notice that this will affect not just a portion of the earth, nor just the earth, but **the heavens and the earth**. Notice, too, that the day will be characterized by a great noise, apparently caused by an inferno of such intensity that all will be melted and dissolved. Jesus says in Matthew 25:32 that "**all nations**" will be affected, not just a remote segment of the population. Matthew 7:13–14 speaks of the tragedy of this hour saying that **many will be lost, and few saved** rather than a few lost and the many saved, as in the earthquake. Remember, too, that those lost are eternal souls, not mere bodies fitted only for time. The Judgment tragedy will eclipse all others combined, yet it is still difficult to impress men with its magnitude.

No warning of the earthquake was given; it came suddenly, unexpectedly. In 1964, it was, in fact, impossible to accurately predict the occurrence of a quake. The people were going about their usual activities of a Friday afternoon at 5:30. Some were enroute home from work. Some merchants were closing shop after the usual business hours. The bars and night spots were getting ready for their usually heavier week-end business. Wives were in the kitchen preparing the evening meal, and children were watching television, all as usual. Then it came! So shall the Lord's coming be. Peter declared that His coming would be as a thief, at the time least expected (2 Pet. 3:10). Jesus said that no man can know when He will come again (Mat. 24:36). With force, He adds that the angels do not know, no, not even the Son. If there is one day upon which we can know He **will not** come, it will be the day that the religious speculators have set. The Lord tells us that people will be engaged in their everyday affairs when He comes, even as in Noah's time (Mat. 24:37–44). "Therefore, be ye also ready; for in the hour that ye think not the Son of man cometh" (v.44).

The effects of the earthquake and its tidal wave were far-reaching. In the city of Tacoma, Washington, 1,100 miles southeast of Anchorage, the zoo animals set up a mighty din that coincided with the time of the quake. Crescent City, California, over 2,000 miles from the tremor was practically demolished by a series of tidal waves. Still further, thousands of miles distant, the gulf coasts of Texas and Louisiana experienced tides six feet above normal. The entire state of Alabama was reportedly moved 5/16 of an inch. Some effects were felt as far away as Hawaii and Japan. The end of the world and the Judgment will have far more extensive effects than any of these. This will be **the end**. There will be no chance to repair or rebuild; it will be much too late to get ready. The effects will not be measured in dollars and lives, but in eternal destruction

and souls! The effects reach out into eternity where there is no ceasing or stopping of the eons. Neither can they be hastened in their pace. The faithful will evermore be at rest; the rebellious will never more be at rest. The Alaskan earthquake and all others combined are hardly more than a whisper when we contemplate the end and the coming Judgment. Through God's love and grace, he has provided a place of safety even from that day of doom. "Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken..." (Heb. 12:28). "But seek ye first his kingdom..." (Mat. 6:33).

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