

Do you feel the world is broken?

John 1:9-14, Heb. 2:14-18

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Introduction: Brokenness is something we never finish dealing with in this life, for a lot of different reasons: maybe it's about lost loved ones, separation from friends or from more favorable life circumstances, or a broken family circle that can never be complete again in this world. Distances can also break the heart, and sometimes brokenness dates back to trauma or woundedness from childhood or youth. But all the disillusionment of life can turn **Christmas into a time of depression**, loneliness, and anxiety for many. Yet our Creator came to earth precisely so that He could walk beside us in all these burdens. **"He came to His own, and His own received Him not"**, declares John's Gospel (Jn. 1:10), but He never let that rejection deter Him from His mission: as our **Advocate/Comforter**, as our **Priest/Intercessor**. We want to think about Jesus fulfilling these roles and the impact He has on the world's brokenness and pain (including our own).

1) You likely heard that the world's population reached 8 billion on Nov. 15, according to UN sources: just 11 years after the world had reached 7 billion (2011), 12 years after reaching 6 billion (1999), 12 years after reaching 5 billion (1987), 13 years after 4 billion (1974), 14 years after 3 billion (1960) – all of these within my lifetime! But it was 33 years prior when the 2 billion mark was reached (1927), which followed the 1 billion mark only after 123 years (1804). That's a lot of people ... and can make for lots of trouble!

So what's going on in Indonesia these days? Earthquakes, on Nov. 21, of 5.7 magnitude; on Dec. 3, 6.4. How often does Indonesia have earthquakes? Pretty much every year, usually of ~6.0), because the island nation is located on the Pacific Ring of Fire, where 75% of the earth's volcanoes are, and 90% of every year's eruptions! Anybody eager to move there? What about Haiti with the worst human rights and humanitarian situation in decades?! This protracted, multifaceted crisis involves multiple deaths by firearms, as well as due to the lack of access to safe drinking water. Nearly half the population faces acute hunger, food insecurity, poor sanitation and lack of safe water supplies; a recent cholera outbreak has claimed dozens of lives. Heavily armed gangs, gang violence and rape are expanding across the capital and in other regions; hundreds of residents have been forced to flee their homes as a result of turf wars between rival gangs. Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating since late August, but the Haitian government is impotent. Anybody volunteer to go on a mission trip to Haiti this Christmas?

What can we say about happenings in China? Unprecedented displays of civil disobedience and protest have erupted in cities across China last month, apparently sparked by a deadly fire in Urumqi (late Nov.), where victims in the burning building couldn't escape because of locked doors and other infection controls. Thousands of Chinese took to the streets in more than 20 cities, beginning Nov. 25, frustrated by lengthy soul-crushing Covid lockdowns, intense testing, and other restrictions on people's movements. It's been the largest act of public dissent in China in decades as demonstrators raise blank sheets of paper in a show of dissent that will hopefully evade censorship and prosecution. Is China on your prayer list this Christmas?

2) It feels like the world is really broken ... especially when we see so many Latins swarming north by the thousands to camp on the doorstep of the great superpower, or to rush the fence or swim the river. Actually the US border control with Mexico reports 6-7 thousand migrant crossings a day, and the total for 2022 has already topped 2 million. What would it take for you to join in? And as of Sept. 2022, over 7 million Venezuelans have fled the Maduro regime's version of paradise to escape the violence, insecurity, threats, high crime rate, lack of food, medicine, and basic services – the crisis is still ongoing! Of course, the same phenomenon is evident on this side of the Atlantic, as Africans clamor to cross the Mediterranean by the thousands (with many dying); since 2009, about 2 million have made the journey. How desperate would you have to be to risk your life in one of those flimsy boats? And after having paid a fortune for the privilege, with a good chance you could end up at the bottom of the sea! Or maybe you'd like to try your luck jumping the fence at Melilla, northern border of Morocco, first built in 2005, getting bigger and more fortified every year. If you're not that good at climbing, then maybe you'd prefer to try your luck in the detention centers of Libya. By testimony of one migrant hopeful, the guards enter your prison room with a stick and beat people like animals. Sometimes they take your money, your good clothes. "They broke my teeth," he said, "so I accepted repatriation." Migrants in Libya are routinely subjected to criminalization, kidnapping, forced labor, violence, torture, xenophobia, human rights violations and abuses.

So perhaps the Greek and Syrian refugee camps would suit you better? Nearly 7 million Syrians are internally displaced, and 6.6 million have been forced to seek safety as refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and beyond. At the end of 2021, 89.3 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order. Life in a refugee camp always includes overcrowding, lack of food and water, lack of education for children, infectious diseases, lack of medical attention, and a lack of sanitary methods for eliminating human waste. The average stay in a refugee camp is 17 years. Kenya "boasts" several large refugee camps, mostly for displaced Somalians: Kakuma, with 60,000, and Dadaab with 223,000 (as of 2014). Zaatari camp in Jordan hosts 80,000 Syrians. But the largest refugee camp on the earth, population-wise, is the Kutupalong camp in Bangladesh, with around 600,000 Rohingyas (persecuted by the Burmese military); the total is close to a million inhabitants when all the neighboring camps are taken into account.

3) It surely feels like the world is broken, doesn't it? Who could ever offer deliverance to so many? And we haven't even touched on our European war: how many Ukrainian refugees are scattered around Europe this year? It's being called Europe's largest refugee crisis

since World War II and its aftermath. Nearly 8 million Ukrainians have left their homeland, not counting forcible migrations to Russia (nearly a million).

But there's more to this brokenness than meets the eye: there's always a personal side to these statistics: the traumatizing impact on the humans who are thus uprooted, separated, and cast out, especially on the children. And we haven't even talked about the folks who have been trafficked. The figure that's cited is almost 25 million, which includes both sex trafficking, i.e., commercial sexual exploitation, and forced labor exploitation. Tragic, ongoing, modern-day slaves! And you'd probably be surprised if you knew the number of your fellow congregants taking prescription medication for depression or anxiety! According to a recent article in *Christianity Today*, more people in our communities and congregations are engaged in mental health struggles than we realize. And you might be equally surprised by "who." The article insists that some of your most respected members are "either effectively managing their illness, stubbornly denying it, or successfully hiding their struggle." I certainly went through a couple of very depressed years in my young adulthood, but for others it's more of a chronic problem. And it's not just adults. Every decade the percentage of children and teens being treated for depression and anxiety increases, with the age of initial diagnosis and treatment getting progressively younger. And it's not just a matter of learning to be more grateful for your blessings, or growing out of spiritual immaturity: "too blessed to be depressed" is a cruel slogan that reflects serious misunderstanding of the deeper issues.

4) Is your God big enough to handle all this "junk"? Is the salvation we believe in able to embrace all of this human need, this human tragedy? These awful messes we make, the chaos we've created, the brokenness we perpetrate – do we really think we can pin all of this on one little baby born in Bethlehem? Is this realistic? Who would ever come to a wretched planet like ours to rescue such miserable creatures as we are?!

Scripture offers us the only thread of hope that exists: 1 Jn. 2:2 calls Jesus our "Advocate" (Greek, *paraclete*), the same word Jesus uses about the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7): He is our Comforter and Intercessor. That's precisely the role of the priest in the Old Testament: the mediator or go-between. We shouldn't confuse the issue by thinking God is the one who needs reconciling – we're the ones who rejected Him! Jesus came as our priest to reconcile us and make atonement for us (Heb. 2:14-18). This is why He had to be made fully like us, so that He could empathize with us in every way, and show us that God really is for us (Rom. 8:31, *Deus pro nobis*). Knowing full well what we sinners would do to Him, He willingly chose to share in our flesh and blood, to participate in our lowly condition, so that He might destroy the one who held us as slaves to sin and death. Yet He was rejected by those whom He came to love and to save. However, the power of His life was so different from anything we humans had ever experienced that all our cursing and humiliation, the insulting, violence and crucifixion they carried out against Him could not put out the fire of His love, or the light of His truth! The blessing of His grace and forgiveness overcame the curse of our sin, and even triumphed over death through the resurrection.

Scottish army captain Ernest Gordon spent three and a half years of World War II in a Japanese POW camp, and later wrote about the experience in his book *Through the Valley of the Kwai* (made into a movie in 2001, *To End All Wars*). In that time, he saw Japanese guards bayonet, shoot, drown, and decapitate his fellow prisoners. He witnessed men being

tortured (having their heads crushed, being tied up by their thumbs, buried alive, and even crucified), denied needed medical care, starved, and worked beyond human capacity. Gordon emphasizes the difference between two Christmas seasons that he spent in the prison camp. Guards were trying to see if they could make the prisoners act like animals; through short food rations, the men would turn to stealing, lying, and leaving the sick to die so they could get their rations. That was Christmas 1942. But Christmas 1943 was totally different: some 2000 men assembled for worship, sang Christmas carols, reading the Gospels together. The camp was clean, bunks were debugged, the sick were given extra food by those who were well. What had happened? It all started when a big strong man began withering away because, as they discovered, he was giving nearly all his food to a sick buddy whom the guards had put out to die. Finally the sick man recovered and the strong man died. As the story began circulating, men asked how this had happened, and that man's Christian testimony came to light. Many began to take interest in the Christian message and meet for Bible discussions; starving for true hope, many came to faith in Christ. Dr. Gordon called it the miracle of Kwai: total transformation in the midst of abject misery and suffering!

The whole world is a prison camp, with a few places that are more bearable than others; but it's plagued by power mongers, sadists, selfish hoarders, unscrupulous advantage-seekers, and under the dominion of an evil prince we cannot see! We desperately need a repetition of that miracle this Christmas: selfless giving, sacrificial caring about the well-being of others in Jesus' name, the transformation of our materialistic obsession by the light of eternity and the Gospel that Jesus brought to our broken world.