

Behold the *Goodness* and
Severity of God

By I A Sadler



Prologue

Most of the research for this article was done in 2019 before there was any sign of a global emergency. During his research, the author often wondered why he felt the Lord's leading in this way. Now that the Lord's mighty hand has been revealed upon the nations through this present coronavirus pandemic, the author is burdened in the fear of the Lord to publish this article. The author's prayerful desire is that it may be an encouragement and a help to the Lord's people at this time of chastening and judgment upon an ungodly world.

Chippenham, UK, 31 March 2020

About the author

Dr Ian Sadler is a Strict Baptist minister and is Chairman of Free Grace Evangelistic Association. He is a research scientist by training, and he visited Iceland many times as a young man.

Front cover: Site of the central fissure of Laki volcano, Iceland.

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The Hand of God Manifest

“The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished” (2 Peter 2.9). “Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets” (Amos 3.7). These scriptures bear particularly upon the events that began at Pentecost on the Lord’s Day morning 8th June 1783. A godly man who was an eyewitness wrote: “In clear and calm weather, a black haze of sand appeared to the north of the mountains nearest the farms of the Síða area. The cloud was so extensive that in a short time it had spread over the entire Síða area and part of Fljótshverfi as well, and so thick that it caused darkness indoors and coated the earth so that tracks could be seen. The powder which fell to earth looked like the burnt ash from hard coal. ... A southeasterly sea breeze drove the dark cloud back inland later that day so that, like other clergymen here, I was able to celebrate the day with religious services under clear skies. The joy of those celebrations was turned to sorrow soon enough. That night strong earthquakes and tremors occurred.”

These were just the beginnings in southern Iceland of one of the greatest volcanic eruptions in recorded history. The scale of the Laki eruption is almost unimaginable; the eruption lasted for eight months and a giant fissure (crack in the earth’s crust) opened that was 17 miles long, from which issued fountains of lava that reached up to 4500 ft high and floods of lava that covered 230 square miles, much of which was inhabited farmland. Part of the eruption occurred under the Vatnajökull icecap, resulting in massive glacial floods for nearly two years. Vast emissions of sulphur and fluorides poisoned the air, water courses and the pasture land. Great rivers that issued from behind the mountains through canyons dried up, only to be replaced by floods of fiery lava that consumed all in their path. Often, the land in front of the lava exploded and was torn apart, whilst day and night continual lightning, thunder claps and tornados further terrified the local people. Outside of Iceland, a choking sulphurous haze arrived in parts of Europe during the unusually hot summer of 1783. Trees lost their fruit, crops failed and many fell sick and died. This led many to believe that Armageddon had come. The winters that followed the eruption were exceptionally cold and harsh, with worldwide climatic changes. In Iceland itself the majority of the cattle died and one fifth of the country’s population died of disease and famine. The total death toll in Europe alone has been estimated in the many hundreds of thousands.



Above: The centre of the Laki Fissure.
Below: A map showing where Laki is in Iceland.



Jón Steingrímsson

Although largely unknown today, the spiritual lessons from the Laki eruption were recorded by the Lutheran minister Jón Steingrímsson (1728–1791), who in God’s providence was placed in the very eye of this apocalyptic storm. Whilst Jón Steingrímsson’s writings are widely known in Iceland and the catastrophic eruption is part of the nation’s history, the godly testimony and spiritual counsel of this servant of God is almost entirely ignored today even in his own homeland. He saw most clearly in these events the judgment of God, yet also God’s sparing mercy; he warned that these events were but a foretaste of what would happen at the end of the world. “Be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.” (Matthew 24.44)

A visitor to Kirkjubæjarklaustur in southern Iceland or an on-line researcher will soon find there are popular accounts about Jón Steingrímsson. He is highly acclaimed for his scientific observation and account of the eruption, his dedication to help those who were sick, destitute and dying, and his medical and agricultural labours. There is the account of the stopping of the lava flow in 1783 outside the church where he was preaching, as if he had miraculous powers. However, behind what the superstitious world, whether religious or profane would idolise, there is an altogether different aspect. This is the almighty work and judgments of God, to which Jón Steingrímsson bears personal testimony. His desire was that others might learn and be warned of the events of 1783, which are but a foretaste of the great day of the Lord and His judgments upon the ungodly. Yet in the midst of these catastrophic events, Jón Steingrímsson writes of the great mercies to those humble souls who look to God for help in time of need.

Jón Steingrímsson wrote a detailed account of his life (originally intended only for his family). He particularly writes of God’s sovereign and gracious hand to an unworthy sinner, and he speaks of repentance and grace, which he acknowledges are given by God. His account contains a very intimate account of his joys and sorrows, falls and deliverances, as well as a unique glimpse of the social and religious conditions in his day. Jón Steingrímsson gives an eye-witness account of the miraculous answers to prayer and the Lord’s almighty hand, alongside the most spine-chilling accounts of satanic activity. This would make very uncomfortable (but necessary) reading for the nominal or formal professing Christian, who just have a form of religion and dismiss the supernatural working of God and the Devil. Jón

Steingrímsson also wrote a detailed account of the Laki eruption, which he intended for publication. The complete book by Jón Steingrímsson on the Laki eruption is very difficult to obtain in English. When the author of this article obtained a copy, it was evident that the contents are “explosive”. Satan is very keen to have them hidden away: his tactics are – “yes, let everyone read certain extracts, but not the whole!” Far from being just a book on volcanology and the eruption, it declares the manifest hand of God in a way that makes one tremble.

God’s sovereign mercy is recorded by Jón Steingrímsson throughout his life. He was in a spiritual line of godly Christian ministers in Iceland from the 16th and 17th centuries. However, in the 18th century there were many changes, and spiritually these were not for the better. Nevertheless, the Lord raised up Ludvig Harboe in Denmark, who visited Iceland in 1741-1745 to seek the spiritual good of the Icelandic people. One of his gracious acts was his personal help to the young fatherless Jón Steingrímsson to gain an education at the diocesan school at Hólar, and to encourage him in the path of godliness. (Until 1801, Iceland had two Bishops and two diocesan centres, one at Hólar in the north and the other at Skálholt in the south; the only two schools in Iceland were located there.) Ludvig Harboe, on his return from Iceland, was used of God in the reprinting of the Icelandic Bible in 1747 and New Testament in 1750, knowing the pressing need for the Word of God in a land where the scriptures were very scarce. What is striking is how the Lord’s servant sowed the seed of truth, and took a special care for the children, and was the means of a great blessing to many for generations to come. Ludvig Harboe passed to be with the Lord in Denmark exactly seven days after the start of the Laki eruption, and would have never known in this life the significance of his ministry through the young and fatherless child, Jón Steingrímsson, he had helped 40 years earlier. Let this be an encouragement to us today to faithfulness and compassion in the ministry of the Gospel.

Conditions in Iceland before the Eruption

In the period preceding the Laki eruption, Jón Steingrímsson in his autobiography records that the country was rife with drunkenness, witchcraft of the darkest form, lying, immorality, callousness and greed; and this included many of the Lutheran clergy. At the diocesan school at Hólar, he describes how the school boys (from whom future Lutheran ministers would be selected) kept a secret occult book of magic handed down

through the generations of school boys. He also testifies based on personal knowledge the prevalence of various frightful demonic manifestations. The Lord sent warnings of judgment through several very severe winters, and then in 1755 the largest ever recorded eruption of Katla devastated large areas of southern Iceland. (Katla is a massive subglacial volcano in southern Iceland, whose eruptions, ash and glacial floods dwarf that of the Eyjafjallajökull eruption of 2010. Katla eruptions have formed the massive sand plains of Myrdalssandur in which former islands are now marooned in a sea of black volcanic sand.)

Jón Steingrímsson settled as pastor in Myrdalur, but the behaviour and ungodliness of the vast majority of the people and clergy is astonishing, even though they lived under the shadow of various powerful volcanoes including Katla and Eyjafjallajökull. Jón Steingrímsson's godliness and diligence as a pastor, farmer and physician drew much opposition, envy, hatred and persecution, including from his own parishioners. After showing great patience and steadfastness, the Lord moved him to Kirkjubæjarklaustur, to the east of Myrdalssandur. Little did he know at the time that this was to be the very eye of the storm that the Lord was shortly to bring in His righteous judgment.

Treatise on Fire

Jón Steingrímsson's written account of the Laki eruption is entitled in the original "*Fullkomið rit um Síðveld*" or in English "*A Detailed Treatise about the Síða Fire*" (Síða being the name of the local district). However, far from being just about volcanology and scientific observations, the book starts thus (see References below for details of the English edition):

"Wishing my goodly reader peace and God's blessing! Of all the prime elements, fire must be the most useful, for without it neither they, nor any form in which they are combined, would prevail. Yet this same fire, conversely, becomes the most destructive of all, if treated uncautiously or if it should please nature's Creator Himself to turn it loose, in order to punish the wrongdoings of men. The destructive power of fire is so well known in Nature that men, animals and reptiles alike flee before it, eager to escape its burns; and in order that His intelligent creature, namely Man, the more closely would reflect upon and be warned against offending the Lord his God, He has likened Himself, i.e. His just anger at Sin, to a fire of

destruction (Deut 4.24 and often repeated in the Holy Scripture) and the tortures of Hell, which await and threaten all forever unrepentant humans, to fire (Matt. 25.41) and to a fiery and sulphurous pit (Rev 19).”

After this, Jón Steingrímsson proceeds to give a brief exposition on the subject of fire from the Word of God, which he sees as the foundation and basis for what he is to write. Most remarkably, Jón Steingrímsson then describes the situation and signs immediately prior to the eruption, which were the forewarnings of God’s judgments.

“For a number of years preceding this volcanic fire and scourge of the land, this country had experienced high fertility and great bounty, with such a blossoming and fruitfulness throughout and the most moderate weather both on land and at sea, but the final year exceeded all bounds. But the disorder and unrepentant carelessness which prevailed here ... is so regrettable that I cannot waste words in describing it. People experienced such surfeit of food and drink that some of them, especially the servants, vagrants and layabouts, had become so choosy about their food that they wished to eat only the best and most savoury of foods. Imbibing of alcohol and indulgence in tobacco increased in like manner. ... This reached such heights that there were some clergymen here who maintained they could not perform religious services in proper fashion and with devotion without the support of spirits; the homes of these same men were later to be devastated, as also befell many others similarly inclined.”

Jón Steingrímsson goes onto describe many more disorders and evidences of prevailing greed and pride, which we read in the Scriptures comes before a fall. (Proverbs 16.18) There was much wrangling and dispute over land ownership and grazing rights. These came to their height just as the eruption commenced.

“All this fracas reached its peak just before the fires broke out and promptly brought the commotion to an end. This fire drove those people, who could scarcely ever remain in the church during religious service, out of that church and never to return, except those whom the Almighty knew beforehand would sincerely repent of their obduracy.”

Farmland that had been the subject of endless legal disputes for over 60 years was swallowed up by the lava. All the legal proceedings were now “brought to an end, as that most just of all judges now showed who was in the right.” Other property disputes relating to the local land registry (where the wealthy and powerful in this world had hoped to make further gain from the poor) had run on for 14 years. The matter had reached as far as Copenhagen in Denmark for a final judgment, but the exact same day the new land assessment was signed in Copenhagen the earthquakes and eruption began in Iceland. The Judge of all the earth overturned the highest ruling in the Danish realm, as all the disputed land was claimed by the fiery lava. God showed whose land it was. The fires did most damage where there was hatred between neighbours.

Jón Steingrímsson records signs and portents that God revealed to him and others who feared God, that catastrophe was imminent. He speaks about a personal revelation he had of this.

“One dream, however, I cannot resist disclosing – each man judge it as he will – for I know it to be true nonetheless. During the winter preceding the onslaught of the eruptions church services had to be cancelled nine Sundays in a row, despite often excellent weather during the remainder of the week. This caused me great concern, and I decided privately that when such judgment fell on the house of God itself, it might well bode some great chastisement to come and I was determined to take special care with my sermon. After I had fallen asleep on the Saturday night of the final week in this row, I saw a regal figure approach me who said: “Everything you suspect is true, and it is because you have failed to teach the people properly.” His words hurt me deeply and I asked him what it was I should preach. He answered: Isaiah, Chapter 30. And let it be a sign to you of the truth of my words, that tomorrow you will have a fair opportunity for your service,” which, although it had appeared very unlikely, did prove to be the case.”

Isaiah 30 ends with verse 33: “For Tophet is ordained of old; yea, for the king it is prepared; he hath made it deep and large: the pile thereof is fire and much wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it.” (v 33) These are telling words indeed!

The floods of lava that poured forth from the mountains through the river



Above: Lava field from the Laki eruption now covered in a sea of moss.

canyons carried all before them in the plains of farmland. The sufferings that are described are heart-breaking. Some managed to flee, but many others were trapped in an area of land around Kirkjubæjarklaustur, almost surrounded by two great lava flows. Jón Steingrímsson was given extraordinary physical and spiritual strength to continue ministering and leading whatever help could be given to the destitute, sick and dying, one of whom was his own wife (a most godly lady) who passed away during the eruption. He would not desert his flock at this critical time, whereas other ministers fled (including one who before eruption was of a most imposing disposition, but afterwards proved a coward). To the praise of God, we would mention some of the Lord's mighty deliverances for the poor of the flock, who were helpless in the face of this cataclysm.

On the Lord's Day 20th July 1783 one of the lava flows was approaching Jón Steingrímsson's church, with the terrible fire, smoke and thunder claps that accompanied it. He proceeded to church with all who could manage to do so, thinking with sorrow that this might be the last service to be held in the church.

“Great as was the calamity which had come upon us and threatened us yet further, and taught both me and others to pray to God with proper meekness that He in His mercy should not be so quick to destroy us and this His house – just as great was His almighty strength in our weakness. Both myself and all the others in the church were completely unafraid there inside its walls. No one showed any signs of fleeing or leaving during the service, which I had made slightly longer than usual. Now no length of time spent talking to God could be too long. Each and every person was without fear, asking His mercy and submitting to His will. I have no reason to believe otherwise than that every man was prepared to die there, if this would have pleased Him, and would not have left if things had become worse, because it was impossible to see where there was a safe place. Of this I shall say no more, so that it will not be said with truth enough that I wish to seek the praise of men for myself or others. No, not to us, but to Thy name alone, Lord, is the glory due.”

When they came out of the church, they saw that the advance of the lava had entirely stopped. On enquiry, it was found that a river had been damned up by the lava flow and as they were praying in the church, an immense torrent of water had suddenly burst forth and the great flood had

cooled the lava-front and provided a barrier against its advance. The people were saved from seemingly certain destruction. Jón Steingrímsson rightly attributed this to God's mercy and divine intervention.

Jón Steingrímsson describes the most remarkable answers to prayer in the provision of food as the immediate threat from the lava receded, but that of disease and starvation grew. On one occasion they gained a catch of salmon never seen before, nor since. On another, a ship became stranded on the shore, and they were able to purchase vital food and materials. He testifies that the Lord provided for those who showed mercy in this time of distress, but gives frightful examples of what eventually befell those who showed no mercy.

With sadness, Jón Steingrímsson records the oft incompetence and corruption of officials tasked with trying to relieve the suffering. Some officials even prosecuted him for giving certain funds to save the lives of families who were on the point of death, because the exact instructions on the use of the money were not followed (it is reasonably suspected that those in authority were angry because they were deprived of their "share" of the funds). Jón Steingrímsson also lamented the lack of a call to prayer by national leaders. However, the faithful brethren knew the Mercy Seat. By 1785 all the donated monies from Iceland and from Denmark were exhausted, and the district governor ordered that 40 destitute people be moved to Jón Steingrímsson's parish. This was mercilessly carried out, and Jón Steingrímsson had no means to support them, nor the rest of his parish. However, prayer was made and counsel taken, and the brethren felt led to go to a certain location near the shore. There they found 190 seals, which supplied the needs of all in the district and lifted the famine. Afterwards a service of thanksgiving was held to God's honour and glory.

Nevertheless Afterwards

No one in Iceland was left untouched by these terrible events. In God's mercy there were many who were graciously humbled and taught. Jón Steingrímsson records in his own district that many were more humble and patient afterwards, with a ceasing of the drunkenness and revelry that had previously abounded. He stated: "The worship of God and public church services were restored to a much more respectable and religious order, which still prevails." There were many testimonies to the spiritual fruit from this chastening judgment amongst the people. Like in many places in the

world, the soil is very fertile in the vicinity of volcanoes, the Lord used these events for His honour and glory.

However, there were those who it would appear did not have ears to hear the voice of God. The Laki eruption coincided with the appointment in 1785 of a new Bishop of Skálholt, Hannes Finnsson. He was assistant Bishop for a number of years, but he had been somewhat influenced by the new ideas of the so-called “enlightenment”, which exalted human reason and advancement above the sovereignty of God and His Word. This started a move amongst the elite that was carried much further after the death of Hannes Finnson in 1796 by the rationalist, Magnús Stephensen. (It behoves us to beware what direction we head in, for our deviation from the truth may unwittingly lead others into the way of destruction.) As the Laki eruption died down, a great earthquake struck southern Iceland in 1784 and destroyed the episcopal centre of Skálholt, regarded by the Icelanders as the cradle of Christianity in Iceland since 1056 AD. This event, rather than bringing about a searching of heart and repentance before God, was used later by those in authority as a pretext for consolidating their power across the whole of Iceland in the newly formed town of Reykjavík in 1801, by abolishing the dioceses of Skálholt and Hólar.

However, the Lord’s hand was overruling all things. The “enlightenment” did not gain support generally amongst the ordinary people and many of the Lutheran ministers. Throughout the country in the aftermath of the catastrophic events of 1783, there was an altogether different spirit. Despite the terrible suffering and poverty that followed, there was a preparation in the hearts of many to receive the Word of consolation and salvation, which the sparks of human kindling could not provide. This was evidently the work of the Holy Spirit. Jón Steingrímsson passed to his eternal home in 1791, but had he lived longer he would have rejoiced to see the Lord’s blessing that was to come.

Although the leaders of the “enlightenment” through Magnús Stephensen had gained control in 1794 of the only two printing presses in the country (and the publication of the Holy Scriptures was the least of their concern), the Lord made a way for the seed of the Word to be sown into the ground prepared in the furnace of affliction. The Lord worked from an altogether and unexpected direction. In particular we must mention the Scottish missionary, Ebenezer Henderson, who was born in 1784 in the midst of the calamities and starvation of the Icelanders. Some 30 years later he was to be

the means in God's hand of bringing the Bible in Icelandic to even the most remote parts and humble dwellings of that country.

News of the sufferings of the Icelandic nation spread far and wide, not just their material needs but also their spiritual needs. The great famine of the written Word was taken up in Denmark by faithful brethren, who, in collaboration with the British and Foreign Bible Society (from which the Trinitarian Bible Society came), reprinted the Icelandic New Testament in 1807, followed by the Icelandic Bible in 1813. Bibles were extremely scarce, as it was more than 60 years since Ludvig Harboe's visit and the printing of the Icelandic Bible in 1747. The distribution of the 1813 reprint of the Bible was overseen by Ebenezer Henderson, who spent an entire year travelling the length and breadth of Iceland. His labours and testimony are remarkable, for he found an almost universal thirst for the Word of God, and evidence of a moral sobriety and kindness quite unlike most of continental Europe, with many of the Lutheran ministers deeply concerned about the spiritual good of their flocks. The seemingly large numbers of Bibles printed in Copenhagen proved quite insufficient for the demand, and he returned with the request for many more to be printed and shipped to Iceland.

Ebenezer Henderson was the means of the formation of the Icelandic Bible Society, to which the Bishop of Iceland, Geir Vídalín, gave his whole-hearted support. Ebenezer Henderson had very warm fellowship with the most godly of the Lutheran ministers, in particular Jón Jónsson of Möðrufell, a staunch defender of the truth against the "enlightenment". Ebenezer Henderson also encouraged the formation of the Icelandic Tract Society, led by Jón Jónsson, to disseminate biblical and evangelical teaching to the people. However, above all the distribution of the treasure of God's Word is the most vital of labours.

The Secretary of the Icelandic Bible Society wrote in 1817 to the British and Foreign Bible Society. "We gratefully adore the kind Providence of God, who in withholding from us some portion of earthly good, has yet, with a bountiful hand dispensed to us His blessings. Among these we acknowledge, as by far the most excellent, the gift of His divine religion, which enables us, at once, to supply the want of temporal comforts, and to provide for our eternal welfare."

Conclusion

In the events of 1783 and what followed, we have seen God's almighty purposes unfolding. Whilst at the time, the calamities seemed to obscure everything, but in looking back it is seen that these things "have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." (Philippians 1.12) As we consider the current global events in 2020, let us humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God (1 Peter 5.6-7), and seek grace of God to pray in faith and hope that the Lord may be pleased to give a true spiritual revival.

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Romans 8.28).

References / Principal Sources of Information

Jón Steingrímsson. "Fullkomið rit um Síðueld." 1788. (Manuscript in Icelandic, but translated into English by Keneva Kunz in 1998, and published by the University of Iceland Press and the Nordic Volcanological Association under the title "Fires of the Earth, The Laki Eruption 1783-1784." ISBN 9979-54-244-6.) *Note: It is greatly regretted that this book is rare and very difficult to obtain in English.*

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An internet search reveals many scientific and historical papers that analyse the severe effects on Europe's population and the worldwide climate from the Laki eruption.

(Note: The author is not endorsing every aspect of these books and would seek to graciously differ from certain aspects of Lutheran beliefs and practices. However, it should be noted that, from the establishment of the Reformation in Iceland in 1551 until 1874, the Lutheran Church was the only one permitted in law.)



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