Fleeing Vesuvius

On August 24, 79 A.D., when Mount Vesuvius began erupting, the writer Pliny the Younger was watching from Misenum, across the Bay of Naples from Pompeii. As frightening as it must have looked, the danger from Vesuvius did not immediately reach Misenum. But the next morning, a violent shaking of the earth and great clouds of ash caused Pliny, his mother, and other terrified townspeople to flee for their lives.

A few years later, Pliny wrote two letters to historian Cornelius Tacitus describing the events of that day. Read this excerpt from one of those letters, then answer the questions.

By now it was dawn, but the light was still dim and faint. The buildings around us were already tottering, and the open space we were in was too small for us not to be in real and imminent danger if the house collapsed. This finally persuaded us to leave the town. We were followed by a panic-stricken mob of people. . . . On the landward side [by the sea], a fearful black cloud was split by forked and quivering bursts of flame, and parted to reveal great tongues of fire, like flashes of lightning magnified in size. . . .

I looked around: A dense black cloud was coming up behind us, spreading over the earth like a flood. “Let us leave the road while we can still see,” I said, “or we shall be knocked down and trampled underfoot in the dark by the crowd behind.” We had scarcely sat down to rest when darkness fell, not the dark of a moonless or cloudy night, but as if the lamp had been put out in a closed room.

You could hear the shrieks of women, the wailing of infants, and the shouting of men; some were calling their parents, others their children or their wives, trying to recognize them by their voices . . . . Many besought the aid of the gods, but still more imagined there were no gods left, and that the universe was plunged into eternal darkness for evermore . . . .

A gleam of light returned, but we took this to be a warning of the approaching flames rather than daylight. However, the flames remained some distance off. Then darkness came on once more and ashes began to fall again, this time in heavy showers. We rose from time to time and shook them off, otherwise we should have been buried and crushed beneath their weight. I could boast that not a groan or cry of fear escaped me in these perils, [except that I believed] that the whole world was dying with me and I with it.

Questions

1. What specific danger caused Pliny and his mother to flee Misenum?

2. What other dangers did they face?

3. What descriptive phrases did Pliny use when recounting the terrifying effects of the eruption?

4. Why might some people in the crowd have believed that “there were no gods left”?

5. Based on the excerpt’s last sentence, what emotions do you think Pliny was feeling? What might have kept him from uttering “a groan or cry of fear”?