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## Earthquakes, Hurricanes, and Wildfires: *Why Would God Allow Natural Disasters?*

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**We**

barely go more than a couple of months without hearing of a natural disaster somewhere in the world. Hurricanes, tsunamis, wildfires, and earthquakes, to name a few, wreak immense destruction in a matter of minutes. Villages are reduced to rubble, landscapes are obliterated, and families are torn apart.

When a natural disaster strikes all kinds of questions can arise. If God exists, then why do they happen? Other kinds of large-scale disasters, such as the devastation and trauma wreaked by wars and conflict around the world, are no less easy to watch but at their heart are less complicated to explain. People can be cruel to each other. Human beings use their freedom for good and ill. But catastrophes such as earthquakes are different. Natural disasters seem to happen *in spite of* humans, not *because of* them. If God has power to “part seas” and “calm storms,” then surely He could stop them from happening? Or, better still, create a planet without them altogether?

**If God is real, what kind of God might still be worth relating to in this broken world?**

### **A better world?**

Geologists would remind us that the earth’s crust is segmented into tectonic plates; the same tectonics that cause earthquakes are also crucial for fostering and sustaining life on Earth. The process of subduction (one plate sliding beneath another) is vital for recycling carbon and other minerals from deep within the earth, back to the surface. Mountain ranges also play a vital role in the hydrological cycle, delivering water to rivers that provide vast areas with water.

### **Suppose there is no God...**

What are our options for making sense of natural disasters if God does not exist? If God does *not* exist, then this is just the way the world *is*. Tectonic plate collisions release shock waves, and where a person happens to be at that moment is just the luck of the draw. Some people are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Statistically speaking, there are half a million earthquakes every year. Although only 100 are strong enough to cause any damage, chance alone can explain why every so often there will be a big one.

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Many helpful scientific explanations we look to are vital to our understanding. But are they sufficient to answer our deepest questions about natural disasters? Not at all. They don't help us to make sense of why our in-built response is not simply to accept the natural way of things. In the face of disasters, we get angry; we object; we rail against it.

To call something a “disaster” is to make a moral judgment, to imply that something is *wrong with the world*, that things could or should be better than they are. What kind of universe makes best sense of this? Is it a godless universe from which moral sentence is an unexpected anomaly? Or a universe that has been moral from the beginning because it was brought into being by a good God? Perhaps unexpectedly, our grief and sadness at natural disasters are not a pointer away from God, but toward Him.

What other approaches can we look to?

### **100% natural?**

One approach highlights that there's really no such thing as a purely natural disaster. Every disaster is a complex combination of human and natural factors. Sure enough, the laws of nature act in predictable ways that are beyond human control. But human action or inaction still leaves people vulnerable and ratchets up the death toll needlessly.

Poverty, driven by inequality and greed, is a huge contributor. The number of fatalities in low-income countries is often far greater than a similar disaster in a high-income country. For example, 57 people died in the Californian earthquake of 1989, whereas approximately 200,000 died in Haiti 2010, both quakes being a similar strength. High-density and poor-quality (non-earthquake-proof) housing and failure to evacuate or take preventative measures can lead to deaths that could have been prevented. There's no such thing as a purely natural disaster. Human beings still add to the suffering.

### **Broken planet**

A second approach acknowledges that human factors and natural factors are essential to our understanding, but there are still questions left unanswered. Why are there biological natural disasters, such as childhood cancers, that seem to have no beneficial role whatsoever? Why, despite our best efforts, are we all on a trajectory toward decay and death?

At this juncture, Christians invoke another kind of explanation. In addition to human and biological factors, there are also spiritual factors at play. There is a spiritual brokenness, caused by forces of evil, that has led to brokenness in nature and biology—but not as a personal punishment or judgment from God. Everyone is caught up in the brokenness, and we all experience it in different ways.

### **What kind of God?**

If God is real, what kind of God might still be worth relating to in this broken world? First, a God who not only has sent us instructions on how to cope with disaster, but also has entered human history *Himself* to come alongside us in our pain and grief. The basis of helping others in times of disaster finds its roots in the Incarnation and also in the teachings of Jesus to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Second, a God who will one day bring deep comfort and restoration to all who follow Him. If it's true that Jesus rose from the dead, then natural disasters and the suffering they cause are not the end of the story. There is life beyond the grave. The Bible speaks of a time in the future when God will make everything new and will wipe every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21:4-5). The brokenness and disaster that we see today will be put right in ways that go far beyond anything we can imagine.