

Thank you for asking ... Where was God in the earthquake in Haiti and in other natural disasters?

This year it was the earthquake in Haiti. In 2004 it was the Indian Ocean tsunami. Way back in 1755 it was the notorious great Lisbon earthquake, which was followed by both a tsunami and a devastating fire. Each was a huge natural disaster that wreaked human and environmental havoc. But they also did something else. They raised deep questions about the goodness and justice of God. How could a good God allow such things to happen, especially when they can't be attributed to human evil? There are no easy answers, but here are some pointers which might help to think through the issue, along with a few biblical references:

What can we say?

- Crying out in pain and questioning to God is a legitimate response to suffering, found often in the Bible. We shouldn't be afraid to ask the difficult questions and to bring them to God in serious prayer (much of the book of Job; Psalm 22:1-2; etc.).
- The effects of sin which came with the Fall have in some way extended to the physical environment in which we live. Natural disasters are another reminder that we live in a fallen world (Genesis 3:17-18; Romans 8:22).
- Some of the devastating results of natural disasters are made worse by human sin and are often the results of poverty and injustice (e.g. cost-cutting substandard building, overcrowding, having to build on land that is prone to flooding, etc.). What can we do to limit the effects of natural disasters so that the poor do not suffer the worst?
- God shows himself to be a God of love who has been prepared to suffer for us. In Jesus, he himself has suffered extreme pain and death. He is not the kind of god who throws thunderbolts from afar and is remote from our suffering (John 3:16; Romans 5:8).
- One of the ways God shows his love in the aftermath of natural disasters is through the compassionate action of Christian aid agencies and individuals. One answer to the question 'where is God ...?' is: 'he is in all the Christians who are showing compassion and providing practical help'.
- God is committed to the long-term future of his creation. After the flood, he promises Noah that such a global-scale cataclysm will never happen again (Genesis 9:1-17, esp. v. 11).
- There is a time coming when all the evil of this world (presumably including natural disasters) will be ended and when the world itself will be renewed. God is working towards the end of natural disasters (Revelation 21:1-8).
- Between now and then God gives us the opportunity to be reconciled to him. When some people asked Jesus about a tragedy in which several people had died, he refused to speculate about causes. Instead he grasped the opportunity to call people to repentance. When we hear about the tragic death of others, does it cause us to reflect on where we stand with God ourselves? (Luke 13:1-9; 2 Peter 3:1-9)

What NOT to do

- Claim to know more than we do. There are times when we simply have to say, 'I don't know exactly. There are some things I can say, but I don't understand it all'. (Romans 11:33; Job 42:3).
- Apply theological statements that may be true in a way that is shallow, inappropriate or insensitive. Just because something is theologically correct, it might not be the right thing to say to *this* person on *this* occasion (this was where Job's "comforters" went wrong - Job 42:7ff.).

- Ascribe particular disasters to God's judgement on particular people. It is too easy to say 'these people have suffered this because they are especially sinful.' There are several occasions in the Bible where people say this, or imply it, and are shown to be completely wrong (Job 42:7ff.; Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-7).
- Hide behind philosophical arguments as an excuse not to take action. We can be so busy asking 'why?' that we forget to ask 'what can I do to help?'
'...for the early Christians, suffering was not a metaphysical problem needing a solution but a practical challenge needing a response of faith.' (Australian journalist Barney Zwartz citing theologian Stanley Hauerwas in Australian newspaper *The Age*)

Perhaps the best thing is to remember that the existence of suffering in the world is not the only thing we know about God. God is not just a philosophical idea to be investigated. He is 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort' (2 Corinthians 1:3, NIV). We must see all suffering against the background of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, there are natural disasters in this world. Yes, they cause terrible suffering. But the God who allows them to happen, for reasons we cannot seem to fathom, is also the God who has given his own life for us and offers us a place in his new creation where such disasters will be no more than a distant memory.

James Leach March 2010