

WHERE IS GOD?

GOD AND THE HAITI EARTHQUAKE

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Where is God? That question is an understandable reaction to the appalling earthquake in Haiti where on January 10, 2010 around 200,000 people died in under a minute. A second question follows upon it: how can anyone believe – or even want to believe – in a God who can crumble houses onto families, topple hospitals onto patients and collapse schools on children? Here we face the old challenge of the sceptic: if, as we Christians claim, God is both all-powerful and good then why did this happen? Surely, they say, only one of two conclusions is possible and neither leaves the idea of the Christian God intact. Either we must conclude that God *couldn't* stop the earthquake happening, in which case he isn't all-powerful or he *wouldn't* stop it happening, in which case he isn't good.

To fully try and answer such challenges would take a book. Here, I simply want to raise some issues that need to be considered in any response. Yet before we do this we must pause. The best and most honourable response to suffering has always been to act first and philosophise later. The people of Haiti do not need an explanation of why this event has happened; they have more pressing problems. This is the same principle that applies in our own personal relationships; when we go and visit a bereaved friend, we do not try and explain what has happened. We put our arms around them, weep with them and try and help. Indeed, we read in John's Gospel that Jesus wept at the funeral of a friend (John 11:35). The Christian God is not a remote detached being who doesn't care about suffering, but he suffers with us. Interestingly enough there are a number of places in the Bible where God says, in effect, to curious human beings 'Don't waste your breath asking questions; get on with the task of doing what you're supposed to be doing.' (Job 37-24, John 21:21-22; Acts 1:6-8.) In short, the priority is response first and reflection later.

With that in mind let us consider some points.

- It is worth considering the curious fact that every normal person, whether atheist or believer, has similar reactions when faced with such a disaster. All of us find them an outrage and all of us feel sympathy for the victims. Yet if we do hold to the atheist position that there is no God, this is rather puzzling. You see if human beings are quite simply no more than the product of natural selection over millions of years then there is absolutely no reason at all why we should be appalled by such events. If we are created by Nature then why do we find ourselves uncomfortable with any of Nature's acts? Does not Darwinism teach that we are adapted to this world? So why should earthquakes (or volcanoes or tsunamis)

provoke our outrage? Wouldn't it be more logical to shrug our shoulders and say 'It's the way the Earth works' and simply walk on without another thought? Yet no one but a monster would do this. The fact is that human beings do suffer when others suffer. The best explanation of this is surely the one the Bible gives: that human beings are made in God's image (Gen. 1:27). This means lots of things but one is surely this: we are designed to be both indignant at things that are immoral and compassionate to those who suffer.

- It is also worth asking ourselves whether part of the problem is that we have reshaped the God of traditional Christianity (holy, righteous and loving) into a somewhat cosy celestial grandfather (closely related to Santa Claus) whose role extends no further than supplying our wants and solving our problems. We need to remind ourselves that Christianity will soon be 2000 years old and has been faced with the problem of suffering from the very first. After all, in the first few centuries AD, the average life expectancy was little more than half of what it is today in the West. Death, disease and disaster were pretty much ordinary events. Yet the Church grew. Since then Christians have experienced both private and public disasters and yet kept their faith intact. Ironically, Christianity as a religion does much better in cultures where suffering occurs than in those where prosperity prevails. In other words, what we bystanders consider to be the intellectual problem of suffering may be less of an issue to those who are actually suffering.
- We also need to be logical about the way the universe works. In the real world, things always have consequences. So although we find both gravity and water good, yet both can kill us. The same rule applies to the whole vast process of plate tectonics; volcanic activity and mountain building is good because it allows the release of gases and nutrients into the atmosphere and oceans. Without moving plates this world would eventually become flat, lifeless and dull. After all, the same tectonic motion that caused the Haiti earthquake has given rise to the awesome beauty of the Caribbean islands. It is probably not possible to have a habitable world without some kind of plate tectonics and all the perils that go with it.
- Christianity has never taught that the world we see about us is how God intended it to be. The result of sin – the rebellion of human beings against God – means that the created order is distorted so that disease and destruction occur. It is probably significant that in Genesis 3:17 we are specifically told that the ground is cursed because of sin. The point is while we do have an elegantly designed Earth, all is not as it should be. Yet, if Christianity teaches that the earth is not what it was, it also teaches that it is not what it will be either. The earth has already been redeemed by Christ's death on the cross and one-day it will be remade in glory (Romans 8:19-22).
- It will not hurt to keep earthquakes in proportion. The occasional catastrophic earthquake should not disguise the fact that, statistically speaking, they are a relatively minor hazard of living on Earth. In 2009, earthquakes killed less than 2,000 people worldwide and in 2007 the figure was 600. In comparison, each year there are around 3,000 road deaths in the UK and roughly 10,000 murders by firearms in the USA. In the 20th century alone, wars and genocide killed at least 180 *million* people. Perhaps the most sobering statistic is the estimate that some 16,000 people die across the world *each day* due to malnutrition. In other words dreadful though it was, the death toll of the Haitian earthquake is equivalent to two weeks' worth of ordinary human hunger. If we are to accuse God of causing unnecessary suffering, we must also find ourselves guilty of the same charge.
- While we may wish to blame God it is undeniable that human beings have made matters worse. Haiti suffered from overcrowding, badly-built buildings, an

inadequate healthcare system and had made almost no preparations for a disaster despite warnings by reputable geologists that a major earthquake was overdue. The result was that there were far more casualties than there should have been. Earthquakes of similar magnitude have occurred in developed countries with only a fraction of the dead and wounded. For instance the 1989 Loma Prieta, California quake (also Magnitude 7) saw 63 deaths while the result of the Magnitude 7.2 quake at the densely crowded Japanese city of Kobe in 1995 was 6,434 deaths. So Haitian unpreparedness was in part responsible; notably the widespread corruption that had impoverished the country and cheated on building quality. Some who know the country argue that things were made much worse by the religion and culture of Voodoo which holds that life is so governed by unpredictable supernatural powers that planning is a waste of time. Yet the neglect was not just that of the Haitian leaders. For decades, Western countries were only too happy to see corrupt dictatorships persist in Haiti as long as they prevented the spread of Communism from neighbouring Cuba. There also were the usual inequalities of trade between rich and poor nations. True, the developed world gave Haiti financial assistance, but by paying insufficient attention to where the aid was going they poured petrol on the flames of corruption. The disaster in Haiti was magnified by human errors and we must share some of the blame.

- We must also ask whether it is possible that some of the unease about the Haitian earthquake comes from the way that it reminds us of two unpalatable facts: that we are neither immortal nor in control of our lives? We do not like to think of death and our culture places a very high value on human power and autonomy; are we not 'the masters of our fate'? There is something almost traumatising about the way that the shaking of the solid earth undermines (sometimes literally) all that we are and have achieved. Without warning, in seconds, destruction and death are upon us. Earthquakes remind us that life is more than comfort and prosperity.

So how *are* we to see the earthquake in Haiti? Jewish culture at the time of the New Testament of the Bible evidently held to a tight cause-and-effect link between sin and disaster. They believed in the simple creed 'bad things happen to bad people'. Remarkably, Jesus rejected this view. So in Luke 13:1-5 we read: 'Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them — do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.'" A similar teaching occurs again in John 9:1-4. Yet if earthquakes are not actually acts of judgement they are *symbols* of judgement. In Revelation 16:12 we read of an earthquake heralding the appearance of God as Judge of the world. However else we view the Haitian earthquake, it may be no bad thing to see it as a warning and a reminder of our own mortality. It may be no coincidence that at the crucifixion of Christ, there was an earthquake (Matthew 27:51). It is one of many pointers to the significance of that death. In Christ, God himself took upon the judgement that should have been ours, so that we might be spared it. It is as if, amid the tumbling buildings of an earthquake, Christ allowed himself to be crushed under the weight of the falling masonry so that we might escape being crushed by judgement.

Where is the Christian God in such earthquakes? The answer is that he is in them so that we might be spared worse.

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