

# How to make sense of an earthquake if God exists

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I cannot stop thinking about the Turkish grandmother on the radio two nights ago. The voice of someone beside themselves with grief goes to the core of our humanity. Her granddaughters were gone, buried beneath a building and unlikely to have survived the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that struck on Monday. This lady is one of thousands.

The scale and intensity of natural disasters is hard to comprehend, especially in the seismically stable UK. In a matter of minutes, buildings are reduced to rubble, families are decimated and landscapes obliterated. Children are orphaned, mothers are left childless.

When a natural disaster strikes, all kinds of questions arise. If God exists, then why do they happen? Some argue that such widespread and needless suffering surely goes against the grain of belief in a God who claims to be good and have power over the forces of nature.

Other kinds of large-scale disaster, such as the devastation 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 and are capable of unspeakable violence. The approaching one-year anniversary of Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a stark reminder that human beings use their freedom for good and ill. Catastrophes such as earthquakes are different.

Natural disasters seem to happen in spite of humans, not because of them. Our insurance policies protect us against "Acts of God". Is this what they are? But what kind of God sanctions an earthquake? If God has power to "part seas" and "calm storms", then surely God could stop them happening? Or better still, create a planet without them?

Geologists remind us that the Earth's crust is segmented into tectonic plates and 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. We also cannot ignore the fact that the beautiful mountain ranges that we climb up in the summer and ski down in the winter are also created by plate tectonics.

Some may argue, of course, that even stunning beauty is a high price to pay for bodies crushed beneath buildings. Yet geographers remind us that mountains themselves also play a vital role in the hydrological cycle, delivering water to rivers that provide vast areas with water.

None of this helps us with the question of where God is in a natural disaster. Yet it does show that the question of whether there could have been a better world is more complex than it might originally seem.

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. The universe we inhabit is a closed system of cause and effect and the laws of nature acting upon matter. Tectonic plate collisions

release shockwaves 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. There are half a million earthquakes every year, and although only 100 are strong enough to cause any damage, chance alone can explain why every so often there will be a very big one.

The sciences describe events in the natural world with elegance and insight, but they do not answer our deepest questions about disasters. Nor do they help us to make sense of why our inbuilt response is not simply to accept the natural way of things. In the face of disasters, we get angry, we grieve, 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 morality? Is it a godless universe from which moral sentience is an unexpected anomaly? Or a universe that has been moral from the beginning because it was brought into being by a good God? Our grief and anger at natural disasters are not a pointer away from God, but towards him.

But more than that, in the person of Jesus, God is someone to whom we can take our grief and trauma. He is all too acquainted with sorrow and grief yet somehow is able to carry ours as well and make a way through, even if our worst nightmares come true. Where is God in a natural disaster? He is right in the midst of the mess.

Dr Sharon Dirckx is a speaker and author. Her upcoming book, *Broken Planet*, is published by IVP (£10.99).