

Question: How do Christians interpret natural disasters like tornadoes, hurricanes and earthquakes?

What is God doing when these events happen?

As creator of heaven and earth, our God is the sovereign ruler of all things (Colossians 1:15-17). There is no place we can flee from the presence of His Spirit (Psalm 139:7-11); and as the Almighty Lord God “who is, and who was, and who is to come,” he is not limited in time or space (Revelation 1:8). This means that nothing can happen outside of his divine knowledge or presence. By the questions he posed to Job, God also made it clear that he is the source of natural phenomena like snow, wind, lightning, rain and ice (Job 38:22-30).

However, to declare that God is the source and controller of nature’s events is not to say we have the ability to know his purpose in these events. In fact, there are numerous purposes he may be accomplishing in any one event. For example, the statement of Jesus that the Heavenly Father “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45) suggests that he may often allow nature to function by its own random processes. At the same time, the Lord may use these events in our world to test those who trust him so they can develop spiritual maturity and perseverance (James 1:2-4; cf. Romans 5:3-4). The prophet Isaiah said God sometimes comes “with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire” against those who are enemies of his people (Isaiah 29:6). However, Jesus also made it clear that every individual who suffers in a disaster is NOT suffering because of some sin on his or her own part (Luke 13:1-5). At other times, God may use a tragic event as an opportunity to show his power to heal (John 9:1-3). The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that God disciplines his people as a loving father does his children for their good. Hebrews 12:11 adds: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” By means of any specific natural disaster, God may be accomplishing any one or all of the above.

Each time there is another disastrous event, I have been impressed by the way these events bring out both the best and the worst in people. For the most part, Americans are patient and thoughtful of one another.

Many deeds of kindness and compassion are witnessed as people come together to clean up the aftermath of a storm. But others become irritable and selfishly insist that the governmental agencies address their needs first. Some people hoard limited supplies of water and food, denying these things to other people in need. Some take unjust advantage of people by charging excessively high prices for much needed supplies. Disastrous events expose the real hearts of people.

Instead of asking why God allows natural disasters, we should try to find ways to give thanks in the midst of these tragedies. This does not mean that we do not weep over lives that are lost as a result of a storm or that we deny the hardships created by natural disasters. However, we can also see how God can and does work for our good in and through these disastrous events. As Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." For more on God and natural disasters see the WWJD article for March 18, 2011, on our website.

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