

Why Do Natural Disasters Happen?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

On December 26, 2004, a violent earthquake in the Indian Ocean off of the western coast of northern Sumatra (of the magnitude of 9 on a scale of 12), initiated several tsunamis (tidal waves) that have taken more than 200,000 lives. It was the deadliest natural disaster in the past quarter of a century. But as horrible as it was, it was but a ripple compared to some quakes in recorded history.

In 1556, an earthquake in China took the lives of 830,000 people. In India, an earthquake in 1737 killed 300,000. Almost thirty years ago (1976), a massive quake in China destroyed 655,000 souls.

The Sumatra quake, which scientists have measured with modern instruments, was so powerful that it is believed to have moved some islands about 50 feet. In addition, seismologists think that it wobbled the earth on its axis, accelerating the rotation speed, thus shortening the length of our day by fractions of a second — which is remarkable in view of the planet's precision movements.

Unfounded Speculations

Unfortunately, hysterical religious speculators are already pronouncing judgments as to the spiritual significance of this event.

Dispensational premillennialists are claiming that this is but another indication of the impending end of time. They cite Matthew 24:7b as proof, neglecting to mention that this prophecy pertained to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (cf. 24:34).

The forty years between the death of Christ and the Roman conflict was repeatedly punctuated with earthquakes in the Mediterranean region of the ancient Near East, as recorded by Josephus, Tacitus, and Seneca.

The renowned British scholar, E.H. Plumptre, observed: "Perhaps no period in the world's history has ever been so marked by these convulsions as that which intervenes between the Crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem" ("The Gospel According to St. Matthew," *Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, C. J. Ellicott, Ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959, Vol. VI, p. 148).

Then there are always those who pontificate that any disaster is definitely a judgment from God upon an evil people. While it certainly is true that in biblical times the Lord occasionally employed traumatic disasters to punish the rebellious (cf. Numbers 16:30-31), it also is a fact that earthquakes sometimes served a benevolent purpose (see: Job 1; Matthew 27:51; 28:2; Acts 16:26), and no one today can say when God may, or may not, be punishing a particular people with a geophysical devastation.

It is an unwarranted generalization to assume that every earthly disaster has a specific punitive goal — though any one of them surely could. Remember, "his ways are past tracing out" (Romans 11:33).

Finally, there is the confused person who attempts to use disasters of this sort as an argument against the existence of a benevolent God. If God is watching over us, and he is able to control nature, why do these harmful events occur?

The major thrust of this article, therefore, will be to address this concern. Why do earthquakes occur? Is there any reason why such are not inconsistent with Heaven's benevolent plan for the human family?

First, we may ask: exactly what causes an earthquake? This is an intriguing question and it may be approached from two vantage points — the immediate and the remote.

Immediate Causes

There are two general categories of earthquakes — volcanic and tectonic. The former are quakes generated by volcanic activity beneath the earth's surface. The latter type is the result of shifts in the plates of the earth's subterranean crust.

Geologists are not positive as to what specific causes may precipitate earthquakes. There are four common theories.

One view suggests that there are continents, ocean basins, mountains, and plains that are in a state of balance. Thus, these masses keep their balance by slowly adjusting.

Another idea is that the earth is cooling off, hence, shrinking. As it shrinks, quakes occur.

A third theory speculates that convection current takes place inside the earth's core, so that the warmer, lighter parts rise, while the cooler, heavier regions fall. These variables allegedly initiate quakes.

Finally, some scientists argue that the continents are gradually drifting apart as a result of an original, one-continent breakup. The movement is believed to cause disturbances within the earth.

Some of these theories are based upon uniformitarian (i.e., evolutionary) presuppositions ("the present is the key to the past"). Hence, to that degree they obviously are incorrect.

A Catastrophic Cause

For the Bible student, the greater question is this: Is there possibly an ancient cause that created conditions which facilitate the many earthquakes that happen throughout the world daily? Incidentally, about 50,000 earthquakes occur annually that are significant enough to be felt without the aid of instruments. About 100 are powerful enough to be destructive in a major way.

Earthquakes are measured on a scale of 1 to 12. The first 5 stages usually do little damage; from 6 onward, quakes become more violent — plaster cracks, chimneys fall, and the ground cracks open. If an earthquake measures 12, there is far-reaching devastation.

But is there possibly an "historical" cause that so changed the features of the earth, that our planet is yet reeling from the blow? Many scholars believe this concept is entirely feasible.

Earth's Altered Environment

One thing known for certain is that there has been a tremendous change from the environment of the ancient earth, compared to that of today. The facts of the fossil record reveal that the early earth flourished in a temperate, paradise-like atmosphere that was quite unlike the harsh differentials that obtain in the modern world.

Alfred R. Wallace, who actually "scooped" Charles Darwin in advancing the modern theory of evolution, wrote the following:

"There was but one climate known to the ancient fossil world as revealed by the plants and animals entombed in the rocks, and the climate was a mantle of spring-like loveliness which seems to have prevailed continuously over the whole globe. Just how the world could have been warmed all over may be a matter of conjecture; that it was warmed effectively and continuously is a matter of fact" (*The Geographical Distribution of Animals*, New York: Harper Bros., 1876, Vol. I, p. 277).

Dr. Robert Jastrow, a modern scientist who has been characterized as "the greatest writer on science" of this generation, and who is an ardent evolutionist, concedes the same point in his attempt to explain why dinosaurs became extinct.

"But seventy-five million years ago, the world began to change. This was the challenge that the inflexible dinosaurs could not overcome. Surprisingly, the forces of change that led to their destruction did not originate on the surface of the earth, but deep inside it."

Jastrow continues, asserting that the earth

“began to stir, and great masses of molten rock moved upward to the surface. Volcanoes erupted in repeated upheavals of the earth’s crust

“The restless movements of the earth continued. The continents moved apart, and new mountains were created; the Alps and the Rocky Mountains were among the great ranges formed at that time. The upward thrust of huge rock masses, in turn, disrupted the flow of currents of air around the globe, leading to a further deterioration of the pleasant climate” (*Until the Sun Dies*, New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1977, p. 71).

The question for our present consideration, then, is this. What precipitated these subterranean explosions that separated certain landmasses, pushed up mountains, etc.? Modern geologists haven’t a clue.

One scientist has written, “the cause of the deformation of the earth’s outer layers and the consequent building of mountains still effectively evades an explanation” (A.J. Eardley, “The Cause of Mountain Building — An Enigma,” *American Scientist*, June, 1957, p. 189).

The Biblical Flood

Informed people who have a regard for the integrity of the sacred scriptures are aware of the fact that many centuries ago there was a catastrophic flood, sent by God as a consequence of the wickedness of mankind (Genesis 6:5-8). This deluge covered the entire globe (Genesis 7:19,21), and was utterly devastating in terms of the destruction of almost the whole of the human family (Genesis 7:1; cf. 1 Peter 3:20).

There was nothing before, nor has there been since, anything comparable to it; nor shall there ever be again — until the earth itself is destroyed at the time of Christ’s return (2 Peter 3:5-7).

The biblical account of those forces that precipitated the deluge is succinct and powerful.

“In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights” (Genesis 7:11-12).

Several terms within this text are worthy of closer investigation: “deep,” “fountains,” and “broken up.”

The deep

The word “deep” (tehom) reflects the entire body of water that constituted the major seas of the planet, after they were separated from the waters “above the expanse” (Genesis 1:7; cf. 1:2; Psalm 104:6). Moses described the initial events of the third day of the creation week as follows:

“And God said, Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so” (Genesis 1:9).

In spite of the fact that the waters of the earth shared a common bed, because of their relative distribution they nonetheless were designated as “seas” (plural — v. 10). A look at a world map reveals this arrangement, even as the waters stand in the post-flood world — which must be somewhat different from the pre-flood circumstances.

Fountains

The term ma’yan, rendered “fountains,” indicates a fresh water reservoir (cf. 8:2); the Hebrew word is used in the Psalms as a symbol of Jehovah’s power (cf. Psalm 74:15; 104:10; 114:8). Another word, ’ayin, also is employed of the subterranean fountains which God created (Proverbs 8:28), and over which he exercises sovereignty (Willem VanGemeren, *et al.*, *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997, Vol. 2, pp. 1018-1019).

Consider Jehovah's question to Job, in challenging the patriarch's criticisms of his Creator. "Have you entered into the springs of the sea? Have you walked in the recesses of the deep?" (Job 38:16). There are, even today, freshwater springs beneath the ocean floor in many parts of the world, e.g., Greece, Italy, Australia, the South Sea Islands, along the Atlantic continental shelf, etc. Almost certainly they were significantly greater in the antediluvian world.

Broken up

Moses writes that all the fountains were "broken up" (bq'). The original word has a variety of applications in the Old Testament. It can mean to "split," "tear open," "rip," "burst open," etc. The term frequently is associated with **violent** action. It is applied to the ripping open of the belly of a pregnant woman (Amos 1:13). It describes the action of the she-bear who "tore" apart the rebellious lads who mocked the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 2:24), or "breaking through" a Philistine military defensive position (2 Samuel 23:16).

In Genesis 7:11, the beneath-the-seas floors were, by divine fiat, "split in order to unleash chaos, onto a corrupt earth, and the waters [were] Yahweh's instrument" (VanGemeren, *et al.*, Vol. 1, p. 703).

In addition, note the term "all" — all the fountains of the deep erupted. There must have been hundreds of violent subterranean quakes and convolutions on that day when the undersea fountains violently burst forth in orchestrated judgment. The modern student cannot begin to imagine the force that followed, and the havoc wrought on the bosom of mother earth. And Dr. Jastrow wonders what caused the Alps and the Rocky Mountains to be thrust into their heights!

Professor Victor Hamilton has observed that these actions from beneath the seas would produce a "vast tidal wave from the eruption of ocean waters," which, together with the forty day-and-night "massive downpour," would reek a catastrophic reorganization of the face of the globe (*The Book of Genesis — Chapters 1-17*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, p. 291).

If the 2004 earthquake in the Indian Ocean caused the earth to "wobble" and land bodies to move, what do you suppose happened when multiple earthquakes of the deep, in all parts of the planet, erupted in a synchronized concert of devastation?

One writer has noted that in some of the very old maps, called maps of the ancient sea kings, "Antarctica is shown very much closer to Australia than it is now. The map of Arontius Phinneus shows a 16-degree separation between Australia and Antarctica, while at present the separation is more like 25 degrees" (Paul Steidl, *The Earth, The Stars, and the Bible*, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979, p. 27).

Clearly, the features of the earth, following the Flood, would have been rearranged considerably. The post-flood terrain — with mountains thrust up, gorges carved, and deserts created, etc. — obviously would fashion less-than-ideal conditions, forging a new environment that now readily accommodates the frequent unleashing of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, the formation of hurricanes, etc.

Conclusion

In view of the recent Sumatra disaster, some are asking, as noted earlier: "Why does God allow these horrible catastrophes to occur? Why does he not prevent them, or divert them away from where people are, or defuse them once they begin?" These questions doubtless are sincere, but they fail to take into consideration all the facts.

One might as well ask: "Why does God let people die?" They do — every day. According to the latest statistics, 153 thousand people worldwide die each day. That is almost 56 million per year. But we know why death visits us. "Therefore, as through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Death is a divine appointment (Hebrews 9:27) as a punishment for humanity's corporate responsibility in rebelling against the Creator (cf. Genesis 2:17).

Similarly, the blighted conditions of today's globe, which are the result of our forefather's rebellion against God, are the price tag we have picked up on account of human sin — because humanity continues the legacy of the corruptness characteristic of our ancient ancestors (Genesis 6:5,11; cf. Romans 8:20-22; 2 Peter 3:5-7).











Let us therefore close with this little exercise in logic.

No wickedness, no Flood.
No Flood, no change of earth's environment.
No change of earth's environment, no geological disasters.
Thus, no wickedness, no geological disasters.

Now just *who* is responsible for the trouble on this "planet in rebellion"? The fault for these disasters is not God's. It is humanity's!

We should be humbled by these events, and brought closer to our Maker — rather than explosively accusing him of injustices.

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Scripture References

Matthew 24:7; Numbers 16:30-31; Job 1; Matthew 27:51, 28:2; Acts 16:26; Romans 11:33; Genesis 6:5-8; Genesis 7:19, 21; Genesis 7:1; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 3:5-7; Genesis 7:11-12; Genesis 1:7; Psalm 104:6; Genesis 1:9; Psalm 74:15, 104:10, 114:8; Proverbs 8:28; Job 38:16; Amos 1:13; 2 Kings 2:24; 2 Samuel 23:16; Genesis 7:11; 1 Thessalonians 5; Romans 5:12; Hebrews 9:27; Genesis 2:17; Genesis 6:5, 11; Romans 8:20-22

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