

# When the Earth Shakes Our Faith

January 17, 2010

We're "pulling off the road" from our Route 66 series to examine what I consider to be the *big question* that events like the tragedy in Haiti raise about an all-loving, all-powerful *God*.

You've most likely seen images like these in the news since the magnitude 7.0 earthquake hit Haiti's capitol city of Port-au-Prince, Tuesday afternoon.



Authorities expect the death toll to climb to over 100,000.

The teenage son of Cheryl and Ernie Neff's nephew was on a mission trip in Port-au-Prince during the earthquake. There were some tense family hours before finding out that he was okay. He and his team should be returning home to Mission Viejo today.

The Bible tells us that this is a broken world, and that while we're in it we *will* experience our share of suffering. We're told that tragedy will visit the righteous as well as the unrighteous. And there's just a lot about God's ways that we won't (and *can't*) possibly understand, this side of eternity.



However, I want to address an accusation that's made in times like this about the character, nature, and even *existence* of God. Those who don't believe in God, say that we have two choices:

- A. Either God *couldn't* stop the earthquake, because He's simply not an all-powerful being as the Bible claims.
- B. Or, God *wouldn't* stop the earthquake, because He can't be bothered with our human condition, and therefore is neither all-good nor all-loving.

The logic goes that since it *must* be one of those two options (either He can't or He won't), and either one invalidates the God of the Bible ... there can be no God as scripture describes.

So, does the presence of suffering mean the absence of God?



As Christians we must believe four things:

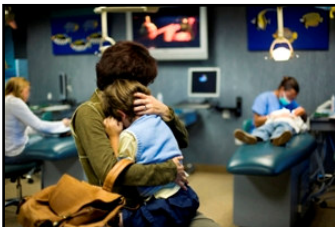
1. Obviously, that **God exists**, which requires *less* faith than examining the evidence of our world and universe and concluding that He doesn't.
2. That this **God is all-good**, even dying for those who hate Him.
3. That this **God is all-powerful**, to think otherwise would be like believing a man could design and construct a beautiful house, but then not be able to change the light bulbs.

But tragedy strikes and natural disasters happen! So, how do we harmonize *these* views with the cruel reality that we live in?!

4. With a Biblical understanding that **God is all-purposeful**.

What does it mean to be a "Good God"?

I'm a good dad, in that it goes against my will to see my children in pain. Yet, when they were growing up, I allowed the dentist to drill their teeth, and the doctor to give them shots. That's because, if I didn't allow certain afflictions, they would inevitably suffer far worse afflictions. So, we tolerate our children's short-term pain for their long-term welfare.



I learned this in a powerful way when my son was four. He had to have surgery and I was in the prep room as they gave him the anesthesia - and he began screaming: "Daddy, help him!" By the time my son was finally asleep, I was an emotional wreck (from the violent struggle between my will to shield and my will to save).

- *Saving-love* outweighs *shielding-love*.



A *loving* God would face the same struggle and would ultimately *have* to allow any suffering that's medicinal, remedial, or otherwise necessary for *mankind's* eternal well-being. And we have to remember that the Lord has a very different perspective on death than we do. To God, death is an entrance not an exit!

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones. - *Psalm 116:15 NAS*

But, what about the *ungodly* ones? From God's perspective nothing could be more tragic than a death *without* surrender to a savior.

And suffering leads a lot of people to surrender. Suffering is bad, but a lost soul is infinitely worse!

In light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on earth, will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel. – *Mother Teresa*

According to the U.S. Census Bureau there are 6,796,500,000 people on this planet, and about 57 million die each year. From where God sits, that's 156,164 deaths per day – every day! And *because* God is *all-loving*, He'll do whatever it takes to ensure that the most possible are *saved* (rather than shielded).

But what does it mean to be all-powerful? Does omnipotence mean that God can do *anything*? No. It means he can do anything that's *possible*.

For instance, *because* he's omnipotent it's not possible for God to make mistakes (that requires being weak or dim-witted) which he isn't. So, God *can't* make mistakes.

Can the Lord make a rock so big that he can't pick it up? No. It's a mistake to try to create a self-contradiction. Only a dim-wit would ask for round squares or colorless color! It would be like trying to create a world where people have freewill and yet no potential to sin or cause harm.

In that same way, a world without suffering would be a lot like a fitness center without a weight room, or a training-camp without an obstacle course.



- Our universe was created as a soul-making machine.

It produces free-willed mortal beings who can choose to develop Christ-like character and mature in appreciation and gratitude of their Creator-Father.

Can you have that *without* struggles and burdens and hurdles?

Even though Jesus was the Son of God, he learned obedience by what he suffered. – *Hebrews 5:8 NCV*

Even people without faith understand that growth comes through hardship; that endurance and resolve offer insight, empathy, and credibility that you wouldn't or couldn't have without it. And just by running its destructive course, this planet reliably shakes mankind out of its complacency and procrastination.

And it serves to remind us to appreciate existence, and beauty, and loved ones. And that death can come at any time and we better be prepared. And that our desire for perfect joy will not be met down here.

And it reminds us that we need to look beyond this world for our fulfillment. And that we are fragile, and mortal, and as temporary as smoke. And that we are as dependant on God as on air, food, and water. And it brings out the best and most heroic in people.

So, we shouldn't be too quick to blame the devil or the sins of those who suffer. Jesus was asked about some men who had been murdered and some who had been crushed when a tower collapsed.



Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ... 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!" - *Luke 13:2-5a NIV*

We don't need to add to the suffering by accusing the victims of committing sins worse than our own. God doesn't hate Haiti!

But, we could have a great theological debate about how, when, and why the earthquakes and volcanoes and floods came about. Was earth created this way, and Eden was a utopian oasis? Was earth caused this way, a chain reaction of Adam's sin? Was earth cursed this way, to counter sin's contamination?



In the end we're only offered partial explanations. So, the ultimate answer to suffering doesn't come in the form of a tightly woven theological theory, it comes as a Person:

He's the One who is all-loving, all-powerful, *and* all-purposeful.

The harsh reality of this life is that no one gets out alive! It's only a matter of how and when we're going to go. The *only* hope we have beyond the grave is to put our faith and trust in the One who did "get out alive" - the One who defeated death and paid the price for our sin.

The author of Hebrews reminds his readers of the time when God's voice shook the earth at Mount Sinai:

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." (*Haggai 2:6*) The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken — that is, created things — so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire." - *Hebrews 12:26-29 NIV*