

Theological reflection resource

How beliefs impact disasters

Exploring the connection between theology
and church engagement during crises



tearfund

Introduction

This resource is designed as a tool to enable reflection on different aspects of our faith. It explores how our beliefs influence our responses to the world around us and to disasters.

Disasters occur when one or more hazards overwhelm a community's ability to cope. This might include damage to lives, homes, livelihoods or way of life. Not everyone will be affected in the same way, as some are more vulnerable than others to the impact of such events.

Each section in this resource focuses on a different theme, with questions to help us think through our beliefs, choices and actions. We recommend you work through each theme gradually, pausing at the questions to reflect on what has been raised. You can do this on your own or in a group discussion with others.

Ask God to guide you as you approach each section, seeking to hear his voice as you engage with these ideas and questions.

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Sovereignty

'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord?'

Romans 11:33-34

In the Psalms, we read, 'The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all' (Psalm 103:19). God's sovereignty means he has ultimate authority and power over everything. We may find it difficult to understand why things like disasters happen, if God is in control. Many people experience terrible situations, even when they are living godly lives.

How do you make sense of disasters in a world where God is sovereign?

It can sometimes be hard to see where God is at work when we suffer. Understanding God's deep love and goodness alongside his sovereignty may help. We know that God loves us so much that he sent his only son to suffer in our place so that our relationship with him could be restored (Isaiah 53:5).

How might these truths help us when we are struggling with circumstances that we don't understand?

Some people believe disasters are the result of evil spirits, a lack of harmony with the spirits, or witchcraft. The Bible teaches us that 'the earth belongs to the Lord, and everything in it' (Psalm 24:1), that he is the Lord and there is no other (Isaiah 45:18), and that he has power to bring everything under his control in accordance with his will (Philippians 3:21; Ephesians 1:5).

What do you believe about the presence of evil in the world, and how does this come together with the belief that God is sovereign?

Justice and love

Disasters can remind us how powerful and mighty God is. Believing that God is in control might influence how likely we are to prepare for disasters or attempt to lessen their impact. We hold in tension the knowledge that he is sovereign with the understanding that he has given us choice and responsibilities. He has given us wisdom, skills and an ability to prepare for disaster events (Genesis 41:33-36).

What responsibilities do you think we have as Christians when it comes to how we prepare for and respond to disasters?

Further reading:

- 1 Chronicles 29:11-12
- Job 42:2
- Psalm 115:3
- Isaiah 45:18
- Isaiah 55:8-9
- Romans 8:28



God is a God of justice (Deuteronomy 32:4). What we believe about this may impact how we prepare for and respond to disasters. For example, if we believe disasters are a punishment, it could affect how we treat those who suffer from them, or whether we believe they will happen to us.

How do you think God views disasters?

There are occasions in the Bible where a disaster is a direct punishment for the sin or immorality of a person, community or nation. In Genesis 6, for example, we read about the flood in Noah's time. The Bible also shows that this is not a general principle. Earlier in Genesis, we see that sin is the original reason for the brokenness in our world, and disasters are one of the consequences of this damage to creation (Romans 8:22). Jesus says that disasters are not usually a judgement on specific people (Luke 13:4-5). He said the sun and rain fall on both good and evil people (Matthew 5:45).

What do you think God's justice looks like?

God is also a God of love. Because of God's great love, Jesus won victory over sin on the cross (John 3:16). His desire is that no one would perish (2 Peter 3:9). God's justice is ultimately going to bring restoration to the world, and all he does flows from who he is.

God is love: how does this affect his relationship with the world?

'He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry' (Psalm 146:7). Jesus set the example for how we should respond to anyone who is suffering. He demonstrated God's love and compassion, meeting people's physical as well as faith needs; he fed the hungry, healed the sick and taught his followers to care for those in poverty.

How can we live out God's love when it comes to disasters?



Further reading:

- Psalm 86:15
- Psalm 89:14
- John 4:7-19
- Romans 5:6-8

Faith

When something as traumatic and destabilising as a disaster happens, it is natural for it to raise big questions and emotions for anyone affected by it. Experiencing disasters can have a significant impact on people's faith as they work through these feelings and questions.



Many people struggle to understand how God could allow something so bad to happen. A disaster may lead people to question their faith; they might feel God did not protect them or answer their prayers when the disaster struck. Some people are left questioning his goodness as they work through their pain. For others, being reminded how little control they have actually causes them to put more hope and trust in God. Some people find they feel closer to God as he comforts and strengthens them in their distress and time of need. Some might look to God for provision and miraculous intervention more than they ever have before.

How do you feel disasters have impacted your faith? In the midst of disaster, what can we hold on to that we know to be true of God?

Some people question whether a strong faith in God is compatible with preparing for disasters. There are examples in the Bible of faith-filled people who prepare for disaster. Noah 'did everything just as God commanded him' (Genesis 6:22), building the Ark and making preparations for the coming flood. Later, we see Joseph preparing for famine (Genesis 41): his actions save many people from starvation and hardship. In Acts, we also see the early church making preparations for a famine, providing for those who will be impacted by it (Acts 11:27-29).

In disaster-prone areas, what do you think it could look like for people of faith to act wisely?

The Bible talks about faith as something active, showing itself through our deeds. 'What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead' (James 2:14-17). Following Jesus includes being moved by compassion and mobilised into action when we see need around us.

What could this kind of active faith look like in disaster situations? In what ways could we help those in our communities recover?



Further reading:

- Ephesians 3:14-19
- James 1:1-5
- 1 Peter 1:21

End times and future hope

‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.’

Matthew 24:7-8

There are different views among believers about ‘the end times’, and what it will look like before and when Jesus returns. This can be seen in people’s beliefs about disasters. For example, some believe disasters indicate we are living in the end times, some believe that they remind us this is coming, and others believe that they are an ongoing part of living in a broken world. If we think the end is near, we may think there’s no need to care for the world or plan for the future. We may feel fearful that disaster is inevitable; we may look in hope and anticipation of Christ’s return. What we believe about the end times can influence how we respond to the threat of disasters.

How do your beliefs about the end times affect how you view disasters?



Jesus spoke about God’s kingdom both as a present reality and as a future hope. This means we can experience his kingdom now, but it is not here in its fullness, as it will be when he returns (Luke 17:21; Mark 1:15). We look forward to God’s plan for the new heaven and new earth, spending eternity with him, but we are also called to play our part in bringing his kingdom in the present day. Jesus taught us to pray, ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, here as it is in heaven’ (Matthew 6:10). Christians carry the good news of this kingdom, which offers transformation in the here and now as well as in the age to come.

In what ways can we play our part in seeing God’s kingdom come in the ‘here and now’?

If we believe the world is going to end, and Jesus is going to return, this could lead us to think that how we treat the world doesn’t matter, or that we should only focus on people’s souls. Jesus taught about eternal life, but he also taught us to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Matthew 22:39). He showed us that caring for people’s physical as well as faith needs is part of bringing the kingdom: ‘Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people’ (Matthew 4:23). He commanded his followers to love and care for those living in poverty (Matthew 25:41-45; Luke 14:12-14).

If disasters are likely to come, in what ways can we ‘love our neighbours’?



Further reading:

- Isaiah 61:1-4
- Matthew 24
- Luke 4:14-21

Prayer

The Bible tells us that our prayers are powerful and effective (James 5:16). Our prayers have the potential to effect real change in the world, as well as having an impact on us personally. After Elijah prayed for fire to demonstrate who God is and then for rain to end a drought, a supernatural fire appeared and then heavy rain fell. These miracles helped turn people back to God (1 Kings 17:1; 18:16-45).

Have you had times when God has answered your prayers, big or small? Do you think God hears and responds when we pray?

‘Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.’

Philippians 4:6

Prayer can encourage us and increase our faith. It is a dynamic, central part of our relationship with God. Knowing we are praying to a powerful God can influence how we think about taking action ourselves. Some believe prayer is the only action needed as God is in control. Others believe prayer is part of the answer, and that we are also called to act. In Acts, the Holy Spirit warns the disciples that a famine is coming, so they are able to provide help for others (Acts 11:28-29). Here, God led people into action through their prayers.

If disaster is coming, how important do you think it is to pray, and how important is it to take action?

Prayer helps us hear from God. There have been many times when prophecies have brought great encouragement and faith, and have later come about. There have been other times, however, when Christians have shared prophecies or teaching which were actually misleading and caused pain or damage.

How can the church grow in discernment, weighing and approving what is from God?

In what ways can we be wise in our responses, ensuring they are consistent with the goodness and love of God, and his command to love our neighbour (Matthew 22:37-39)?

If prayer and action go together, we can pray for wisdom and strength to act, as well as for God to intervene.

When a disaster has happened, how do you think we can best pray for ourselves and for others who are suffering?



Further reading:

- Matthew 17:20
- Luke 10:25-37
- Romans 12:12
- Philippians 4:4-9
- James 5:13-16



The church's calling

'All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.'

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

God's plan is to redeem our broken relationships with him, with ourselves, with others and with creation (Colossians 1:15-20). The Bible tells us that the church has an active part to play in this ministry of reconciliation.

What is your understanding of the church's role in God's mission of reconciliation?

When reaching out to the local community, some Christians think the church should focus on prayer and sharing the gospel, rather than practical help. Others believe that the church is also meant to demonstrate God's love through action: being mobilised to minister to people's needs in the community.

What do you believe the church's role should be in the local community, particularly in times of disaster?

We are called to share the gospel (Matthew 28:16-20). But if we manipulate or put pressure on people, we undermine the good news of God's love. In some disaster situations, the gospel has been mishandled, with help only offered on the condition that people agree to convert, become a member of a church, or receive teaching.

This is not what the Bible teaches. Jesus' story about the good Samaritan demonstrates practical help given freely and generously without condition; Jesus then says, 'Go and do likewise' (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus fed thousands of hungry people because of his compassion (Mark 6:30-44). He gives people free choice: 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me' (Revelation 3:20).

Why is it important that acts of service are offered freely to people of any faith?

'And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.' (Hebrews 10:24)

When disasters strike, the church can shine with God's love and compassion in a time of difficulty and distress. This can be challenging if there is a shortage of resources and skills, or if there is a lack of trust from the community or authorities. Jesus taught us to love our neighbour, demonstrating this compassion as he cared for both faith and physical needs (Matthew 14:13-21; Luke 7:12-14).

How can the church overcome challenges to live out these principles in your community? How can your church be prepared and ready to help if a disaster comes?



Further reading:

- Matthew 25:35-36
- 2 Corinthians 8:1-8
- Ephesians 1:22-23

Creation and environment

'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.'

Psalm 24:1

In Genesis, we see God creating the world and all that is in it. At the end of the sixth day we read, 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good' (Genesis 1:31).

How do you feel about the natural environment in your part of the world?

God made mankind in his own image and he put Adam in the Garden of Eden 'to work and take care of it' (Genesis 2:15). Some people believe the earth will be renewed rather than destroyed, while others believe that the earth will 'pass away'. These beliefs might influence how important we think it is to care for the natural environment. God's ultimate plan of redemption is to establish a new heaven and a new earth, but for now we have to decide what our responsibilities are as stewards of his creation. We can consider how our actions may contribute to disasters, how our everyday choices impact on the natural world, and how we might take better care of the environment.

How important do you think it is to care for the natural environment? What are the consequences if we don't do this?

The world around us is full of natural resources. When people damage or abuse the natural environment it can have serious consequences, both locally and with wider implications like climate change. Think through the natural resources in your context. These might include water sources, metals and minerals, fossil fuels, plants and animals, and the land itself. Who has access to these, and how are they being used? Are they diminishing, being exploited, well stewarded, protected or in danger? There may be decisions for us to make in how we engage with our local environment and treat the resources available.

What role do you think Christians could play in your context, to help look after the environment and prevent further damage?



Further reading:

- Genesis 1:26-31
- Genesis 2:1-15
- Psalm 89:11
- Psalm 104

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everything in it, the world,
and all who live in it.'**

Psalm 24:1

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