

# WHY THE EARTH QUAKES

Matthew 24v7,8 . Romans 8v18-22

The earthquakes in New Zealand and Japan have claimed many lives and caused terrible devastation. The awesome effect of the tsunami set off by the latest earthquake has been horrific to watch. We have witnessed terrible scenes on our television screens – whole towns with thousands of people wiped out. Our hearts have gone out to those caught up in this terrible event. I have heard people comment that these events are of biblical proportions; maybe the Flood in Noah's time was a mega – tsunami.

What are we to make of earthquakes? Seismologists will answer in terms of tectonic plate movement – but do earthquakes have any *meaning*? They bring about terrible catastrophes but do they have any greater or deeper significance?

To secular humanists earthquakes are simply a material fact; that's the way our planet is; there is nothing significant about it. Everything in the universe and life is a matter of random coincidence. Just make the best of it!

To others earthquakes throw up a huge philosophical issue: If there is a God why does he allow such things to happen? The classic statement of the problem goes like this: If God is perfectly good He must want to abolish all evil and suffering. If He is all powerful, He must be able to do so. Yet evil and suffering exists. The dictionary has a special word for this: "*Theodicy*" - the vindication of God's providence in the light of evil. Philosophers have debated this through the centuries.

But biblical Christianity has a different starting point. Earthquakes make us ask the basic worldview questions again: *Who am I and where do I come from – what's gone wrong with the world, and how do we fix it?* Earthquakes are yet another reminder that something is seriously wrong on planet earth.

On one occasion Jesus referred to earthquakes.

**Matthew 24v4-8:** "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 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.**"

Jesus wasn't saying that earthquakes are a sign that the end of the world is imminent. How could he – because earthquakes (as well as famines and wars and rumours of wars) had been a fact of life in Bible lands for centuries. Several earthquakes are mentioned specifically in the Bible. The word earthquake occurs about 20 times in the Bible and 'shake' and 'shaking' about the same number. Middle East archaeology confirms that there have been many destructive earthquakes in the Land of Israel, which is at the northern end of the Great Rift Valley fault.

So what was Jesus saying? The clue is in a strange phrase he uses; he says that earthquakes are **birth pains**. This same theme is taken up by the apostle Paul. He writes of all creation "groaning in travail" awaiting the rebirth of the world:

**Romans 8v18-22:** "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."

New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce comments on this: *"Like man, creation must be redeemed because like man, creation has been subject to a fall. This doctrine of the cosmic fall is implicit in the biblical record from Genesis 2 (where the ground is cursed for man's sake) to Revelation 22 (where there shall be no more 'curse'); and is demanded by any world-outlook which endeavours to do justice to the biblical doctrine of creation and the facts of life as we know them."*

Creation shares in the devastation caused by the fall of man and the fall behind the fall - that of Satan – the great mutiny; the heartache, pain and tragedy associated with earthquakes and other catastrophes is the result of sin – sin that has affected the created world itself. Our fragile planet is groaning for redemption.

The apostle says that *'the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it...'* in other words, God Himself has allowed his perfect creation to bear all the marks of the ravages of sin as a reminder that all is not right with then world - but also to demonstrate that this will not always be the case. God says he is going to make a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3v12,13) where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away (Rev. 21v4) This is the great joy that follows the painful birth pangs.

Listen to Bruce again. *'But the transformation of the universe depends upon the completion of man's transformation by the working of God's grace. The grace of God has already begun to work in the lives of the justified; its continued working is sufficiently attested by the indwelling of the Spirit...'* (the great theme of Romans 8).

*Is this why earthquakes accompanying the great moments of salvation history in the Bible?* It is possible to understand earthquakes as the ground trembling at these great acts of God. But maybe there is this as well: the earth is groaning as *these great events move its redemption closer.*

We see this in the following three major events in salvation history.

**There was an earthquake when God gave the Law.**

**Exodus 19v18:** “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.”

### **The earth shook at the death of Jesus.**

**Matthew 27v51-54:** “Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!”

There is documentary evidence outside the Bible of earthquakes in Israel around this time. In 64 B.C. a strong earthquake struck Jerusalem causing considerable damage to the Temple and to the walls of the city. In 31 B.C. when Herod the Great was king, the Jewish historian Josephus records a severe earthquake “*such a one as had not happened at any other time*” hit Galilee, although it was moderate in Jerusalem. He estimates that about ten thousand people died. Earthquakes in 30 and 33 AD caused minor damage to Jerusalem and to the Temple. Either one of these two could be the earthquake that occurred at Christ’s crucifixion.

### **There was a massive “aftershock” at the resurrection of Jesus.**

**Matthew 28v1-4:** “After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.”

Earthquakes are associated with each of these crucial moments in salvation history in the past. But the same will be true in the future.

### **There will be an earthquake at the climax of history when Jesus returns.**

In his apocalyptic vision the apostle John describes the greatest of all earthquakes when mountains and islands will be displaced.

**Revelation 16v18:** ‘Then came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake.’

This great earthquake is associated with the return of Christ. John sees it inflicting massive changes - on a global scale. His vision echoes the great Hebrew prophets:

**Isaiah 29v5f:** ‘Suddenly, in an instant, the LORD Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire.’

**Haggai 2v6:** ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD Almighty.’

**Zechariah 14v4-9:** ‘On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. On that day there will be neither sunlight nor cold, frosty darkness. It will be a unique day—a day known only to the LORD—with no distinction between day and night. When evening comes, there will be light. On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea, in summer and in winter. The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name.’

There is no need to be afraid. In **Hebrews 12v24-29** the writer refers back to the shaking that accompanied the giving of the Law:

‘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.” 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.”’

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Earthquakes remind us that we live on a fragile planet. We should not be building our hopes on this world. Instead build your life on something that cannot be shaken. But what can we be sure of? *We can be sure that God’s love for us can never be shaken.* This is what God Himself says:

**Isaiah 54v10:** “Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you.”

King David understood this; that is why he could say:

**Psalms 16v8:** ‘I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.’ **Psalms 62v2:** ‘Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes

from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.'

The writer of **Psalm 46** understood the same. These words have a poignant tone when thinking of events in Japan – the earthquake followed by the tsunami.

'God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.'

We need to be sure that our feet are on solid ground; ground that cannot be shaken.

In **Acts 16v25-34** we read of a man and his family who came to realize this. The author of Acts records how an earthquake at Philippi set Paul and Silas free from their prison chains. Earthquakes were well known in this area but this one was no coincidence. Once again the power of God was evident, this time accompanying the apostles in their mission with the gospel.

But consider this: it took an earthquake to cause the jailer to cry out "*What must I do to be saved.*" That's how it is with many people. It takes some great upheaval to cause them to ask the big questions and look to God. In this jailer's case, the physical earthquake caused a spiritual earthquake. His whole world was turned upside down – or should I say, the right side up. He and his whole family listened eagerly to the gospel and put their faith in Christ and were baptized as believers. At last they were standing on solid ground.

Let the last word belong to Jesus from the climax of the Sermon on the Mount.

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. (**Matthew 7v24-27**)

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