

# Episode 240

## Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast. Jeff, the managing editor of BibleRef.com, and Kevin, the managing editor of GotQuestions.org are joining me today, and we're going to be tackling another question that we've been receiving a lot lately. So the question is, why does God allow natural disasters? The questions right now are driven by what's going on in California with the wildfires and truly the horrible devastation that's going on. So in the midst of this conversation, we're going to have nothing but compassion coming from us towards the people who've lost homes, the people who've died, so much loss. And there's blame, there's all sorts of things that be going on, but that's not the heart of what we want to talk about today. Above all, if nothing but compassion for people whose lives have been upended by the fires in California and our hope and our prayers that the fires will be put out soon and that the right measures be put in place to prevent something like this from happening again in the future, as much as humanity possibly can prevent something like this.

## Shea Houdmann

But the big question, we're going to be tackling, I think, three different questions, but the first one is kind of a more general one of why does God allow natural disasters? So, Kevin, why don't you start us off on that? Why does God allow natural disasters?

## Kevin Stone

Well, we're going to look at this biblically. We have to, first of all, acknowledge that God is involved in His creation. He did not just create the world in, you know, six days and then take a step back and say, you guys are on your own. All through Scripture, we have proof that God is indeed involved. So, we have all of these, you know, natural disasters, these horrible tragedies that happen on a very large scale, and we see the loss of life, we see the pain that's caused, and it's a natural question, right? I mean, why would God do this? Why would God allow this?

## Kevin Stone

And I think one of the things we have to remember is that we don't live in Eden anymore. We had paradise. God put us in paradise in the Garden of Eden. That was His plan. All of our needs provided for, responsibilities to take care of, fellowship with and really a perfect existence. But we gave that up. We lost that through our own fault. We rebelled against God back in

Genesis chapter three, and we lost access to Eden. We lost access to the tree of life.

### **Kevin Stone**

So, this is the world that we've chosen, you know, very basically in some respects. The natural disasters and the tragedies that we see are because of humanity's sin underlying it all. Sin is the cause of all of suffering and pain and death, and we would have to include natural disasters in there as well. We just don't live in Eden anymore. Romans chapter eight, Paul says that the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons 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 glorious freedom of the children of God. So, right now in this world that we have chosen, as we rejected paradise, the world that we've chosen has been subjected to frustration and decay and bad things happen. So, ultimately, I mean, at the very bottom of it all, sin is the cause of these types of things.

### **Kevin Stone**

At the same time, we know that God is sovereign over nature. Sometimes he will cause a natural disaster, what we might call a natural disaster. We would see this in places in Scripture, like the plagues in Egypt, where we had the plague of hail, the plague of locusts, all these natural disasters were happening in Egypt. But God was directly causing those things, had a purpose behind it, that was to get Pharaoh's attention, to get his people released from slavery. I would say that those types of things where God directly causes a natural disaster in order to get somebody's attention or to judge a nation or something, that would be very rare. And we want to be very careful about pointing fingers and things like that. But in Scripture, sometimes we do see very directly that God was the cause of certain types of what we would call natural disasters.

### **Kevin Stone**

Sometimes I think, though, God allows natural disasters simply because he's allowing nature to take its course, we might say. He chooses not to intervene. We live in a fallen world, as I've said, and he just lets things play out in that world. Of course, he could always stop a natural disaster, right? He could always intervene if he chooses to. I wonder how many times that he has actually done that, where he has mitigated a natural disaster or he has prevented it from even occurring. We've never known it. We'll never know, probably, how many times God has, in his grace and mercy, mitigated the natural disasters. We know that he is sovereign over nature. When Jesus stood up in the boat, he said, peace be still, the wind was instantly calm, the

waves instantly ceased. And so we see his control over nature, and he can always intervene if he chooses to.

### **Kevin Stone**

We have assurances all through Scripture that God is in control and he is sovereign. Job 38, as God is talking to Job, I think this is one of the best places where it shows God's control of the weather, at least, which oftentimes is an aspect of natural disasters. Job 38, God asks this, Have you entered the storehouses of the snow? Have you seen the storehouses of the hail, which I have reserved for the time of distress, for the day of war and battle? Where is the way that the light is divided, or the east wind scattered on the earth? Who has cleft a channel for the flood, or a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land without people, on a desert without a man in it, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, to make the seeds of grass to sprout? Has the reign of Father, or who has begotten the drops of dew, God asks, from whose womb has come the ice, the frost of heaven? Who is given at birth? Water becomes hard like stone. The surface of the deep is imprisoned. God's point is that he's in control, he's sovereign, and he doesn't always give us the reason why he allows certain things, why he does not intervene and in every situation, but he allows things to continue.

### **Shea Houdmann**

I think that's trusting in the sovereignty of God, mentally knowing that God is in control, but then also accepting something that you don't understand. And I think that's one thing to experience. I remember the tsunami in Asia, what was that, over a decade ago, where over 200,000 people died. It's one thing to hear about it on the other side of the planet and even to see news footage, but to actually be there experiencing and seeing your loved one dragged out to sea and drowned, that's a totally different thing, but blaming God for it. I think we were talking beforehand about natural disasters are often called acts of God, but a hundred years of beautiful weather, that's just weather. So both the good and the bad are equally acts of God in that he can sovereignly control it. But above all, we trust God. We trust God when there's good weather. We trust God when there's bad weather. We trust God when there's horrible weather because God is in control of it all and God has a purpose in it all.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So Jeff, for you, I don't know if you've been around a natural disaster or experienced anything from nature that's caused an impact on you or your family, but why is it so hard to trust God in the midst of that? And then what's the attitude change that maybe we need in order to trust God, even when things happen that we don't like or don't understand?

**Jeff Laird**

Some of it is exactly that. There's our general approach to what do we do when bad things happen, when things don't go the way I want. And Kevin was hitting on the idea that we do not live in a ideal environment anymore. The world that we live in is not exactly the way God intended us to live. And we're here because of choices that we've made. And that also extends, not just to what happened with Adam and Eve and Eden, it actually also extends to the things that we do today.

**Jeff Laird**

You know, we talk about people wanting to blame God. The one thing we very rarely want to do is take a look at ourselves, either personally or as a local culture or as a human culture, that there are some times where what happens with what we call natural disasters has a lot to do with choices that we've made. We had hurricanes that went through the Gulf of Mexico and it hit New Orleans, especially hard. And that's a terrible thing. And that's a bad thing. At the same time, we have to recognize that we as a culture, we as a society decided to build a city right next to the Gulf of Mexico that's under sea level. So it's in a precarious position. So when something like that happens, it's going to make that sort of thing worse.

**Jeff Laird**

Right now, the situation in California, we've made choices as a culture, a society about how we want to handle certain resources. And there's all sorts of political nonsense behind that. Some of it's valid, some of it's not. But the point is that we've made choices and those choices have something to do with the severity of what happens. We've also chosen to live in places where those things happen. So sometimes with natural disasters, we do have to remember the human choice is part of why we experience these things. Some of it is about the things that we should do, that we don't. Some of it's about decisions we make that maybe you're good, maybe you're bad, but they're decisions.

**Jeff Laird**

So when it really comes down to after we understand that is this idea that yes, God is in control, God is sovereign, like Kevin, you were saying, God didn't create and then just step away, but he did create a system of cause and effect. He created a system where the earth and the weather act in certain ways that they are going to do what they do. And if God was intervening so that there was never anything like bad weather that ever harmed anybody or hurt anybody, now we're starting to get into a God who keeps narrowing and narrowing and narrowing down what he wants. And when you actually sit and have that conversation, that's an endless well, you will never get to the end of a chain where you say, okay, now everyone is satisfied with how much God is

interfering. And now I want him to stop and leave me alone. There's always going to be something else that we can say in there.

### **Jeff Laird**

So for me as a believer, it helps to remember that the experiences I have on earth are not everything. This is not what I'm supposed to be forever. Bible talks about identifying as sojourners, just a fancy way of saying passers. We're just on our way through here on our way to our actual home. That's not going to put food on somebody's table. That's not going to rebuild somebody's house, which is why when the Bible tells us to care for the people who need help, that's what we do. We do what we can to prevent the disasters and put out the fires and save people who are drowning and send food and money and resources. But when I look at it actually happening, when you experience it, I have to remember, this is not where God intends me to be forever. So even if I can't really understand, even if I don't like what's happening, I have to recognize that God is God. I am not. And that this is not my ultimate final destination. This is not my ultimate home. So anything that I experienced here on earth, I can trust in God that he has his reasons behind it. And that there is something to make all this right and make all this better in the end.

### **Shea Houdmann**

Jeff, excellent points. We don't dwell too much on choices that people make in the midst of a thing, but that's not what's on their mind. But I think if you choose to live in Florida or the Caribbean every year, there is a decent chance that you're going to get it with the hurricane. Choose to live in San Francisco or anywhere else in the world that's right on a fault line. There is a decent chance that sometime in your life there's going to be earthquake that's going to cause a lot of damage. So yeah, our choices play a big role in this as well.

### **Shea Houdmann**

But I love your point about us being soldiers, that this world is not our home. And one thing that natural disasters should point us to, as Kevin was talking about, this is not the world we were supposed to live in. And this is not the world we are eternally going to live in. So anytime you see something like this, it's a reminder, this world is not our home. It should give us that longing. Lord, I want to be with you. I want to be experiencing you in the place that you have perfectly designed for me, the new heavens and the new earth that will be our eternal home. And so it doesn't necessarily help with the pain in the moment, but it is ultimately a huge attitudinal change to remember that this world is not our home and natural disasters can help us with that change of mindset.

## **Kevin Stone**

Natural disasters kind of make us homesick, right? This world is not our home. We're yearning for seeing Jesus and having him make all things right someday. And I think natural disasters also are really good at reminding us how fragile life really is and how today is the day of salvation. When should I repent and make things right with God? Well, right now. We are not guaranteed tomorrow. We don't know what a day will bring forth, as James says.

## **Kevin Stone**

But during these natural disaster times, I think there are a couple of different reactions that we need to be pursuing as believers. And one is we need to be looking for opportunities for service. One thing that I always look for when I see natural disasters being portrayed on the newscasts is I look for the church. And you almost always see it. A lot of people, they talk about, how's a government going to help? How's the government going to step in? What can the government do for me to alleviate this situation? Where's FEMA? All this kind of stuff. But you know who's working on the ground, boots on the ground, quietly helping their neighbors is the church. In every case, you've got churches, parachurch organizations, believers who are reaching out and meeting the needs. And this is godly. We need to be doing everything we can to alleviate suffering in this world.

## **Kevin Stone**

Philip Yancey, in his book, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* says this, Suffering is not a direct of God, which we must swallow as punishment. Jesus himself spent his life on earth fighting disease and despair. As members of a stained planet, we have the right, even the obligation, to battle the negative side effects of man's fall. I think that's a great reminder. We have opportunities for service to show the love of Christ. We need to be taking advantage of those.

## **Kevin Stone**

And then we also need to have the reaction of praising God, regardless of the circumstances we praise God. If I could go back to the book of Job, I know I just read something from there at the end of the book, but at the very beginning of the book, can you imagine Job's situation in chapter one? In one day, he loses everything. He loses all of his wealth. He loses his family. Ten fresh graves that are holding his children due to what we would call a natural disaster. But then we read this, Job 1 verse 20, at this Job got up, he tore his robe, he shaved his head. So he's in mourning. He's going through the customary practices associated with mourning. Then he fell to the ground in worship. You have to almost read that again. I read it right. He fell to the ground in worship. And he said, naked I came from my mother's womb, naked



I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised. And all of this Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

### **Kevin Stone**

We don't know all of God's purposes, but we do know his character well enough to know that he is good. And we dare not charge God with wrongdoing in any situation. The next chapter, Job's wife says, why don't you just curse God and die? And Job says, well, that's foolish talk. I'm not going to go there. And Job praises God. I think that is, I can't imagine being in his situation. Can't even imagine being in the situation of those who are affected by the wildfires today. But somehow by the grace of God, I would pray that I would have the Christ likeness enough to be finding ways to praise God regardless.

### **Shea Houdmann**

I look at the scripture that says we don't weep as the world weeps. Yes. And we, we grieve when things like this happen, but there should be a difference. People should see a difference in Christians, even in the way that we grieve natural disasters. And Kevin, I love your point about looking for opportunities to serve and minister. If there's anything that often will open up someone's heart, it's something traumatic like this, cause them to reevaluate their priorities. Recognize I could have been one of the ones killed in this. Maybe there's looking, what is there about an afterlife? Those sorts of questions. So we can look for opportunities and someone's just serving alongside. Like, why are you here? Why are you helping me? Why are you doing this? We're servants of Christ and we love you. And we want to help show, show me what I can do. Something like that can just have a huge, huge impact. So I love that emphasis, that change of attitude.

### **Shea Houdmann**

But I would be, sounds like an old King James word. I would be remiss if we didn't address one more question that I've seen come through a couple of times. And I remember it was much more the earthquake that was in Haiti. Again, I don't remember what the year that was, but it was a devastating earthquake. And a few prominent Christian teachers said, well, God sent that earthquake to Haiti to punish them because Haiti is known for voodoo and all these very, they're accurate that that is a true statement about Haiti, but to presume upon what you know about God and what he's doing to say, this is judgment from God, when there's no possible way to know that, well, we're getting questions about the California wildfires. Is God sending these wildfires as judgment on California for, and then they list all the things they think is wrong with California. Don't get me wrong. I think there's plenty wrong with

California, but I'm not in the business of presuming to know why God caused something or why God allowed something. So Jeff, I know you've seen some questions in the Q and A system about this. So what's the corrective for, for this attitude? How can we avoid falling into this trap?

**Jeff Laird**

Well, it's exactly what you just said. There are times where God is perfectly capable of sending natural disasters, but when God performs miracles, he always performs them in a certain context. And that context is always that it's deliberate. It's predicted. It has a purpose. It supports a particular message. It isn't just random. So if it happens and nobody really knows or understands why, then it's good to just assume that this is just the way that the world works and the world operates.

**Jeff Laird**

It doesn't help us with these questions that we struggle with. Like, why did God let it happen? And so on and so forth, but you really can't ever look at something that doesn't have an explicit command from God and say, yes, I know that God did this. And I know exactly why he did it. One of the dangers people get into is they start, they start mining the Bible for words. Uh, you know, if there's one major downside to modern technology in the Bible is it's a concordance on steroids. So every time somebody wants to find something in the Bible, now it takes them six seconds instead of half an hour to find the word they were looking for. And then they rip that verse out of context and wave it around and go, see, see, this is what this means. And this is what God has said and what God is doing. I understand that we want to find answers that sometimes when bad things happen, we want to look at them and say, either I need an explanation for why this is happening, or I want an explanation that agrees with my opinion on this, but that's not the way this works. So the, the attitude change that we talked about has to apply across the board. And that attitude change has to happen before these things happen.

**Jeff Laird**

So for example, when we talked about having the ability to look at something and say, this is not my home, God is in control. I don't like it. I hate it. And I'm suffering, but I understand that I'm not going to understand. You can't force that attitude on yourself during or after the fact that's something that has to be present in you in order for that moment to be experienced that way. Same way that we can't force that attitude on people who are suffering, which is why first reaction of the church, like Kevin said, is not to walk around shoving tracts at people. It's food and shelter and resources and so on and so forth, because that's what the people need right in that moment. And trying to assign an



exact reason why is just part of that bad process. That is doing something that is not helpful, that we don't really need in that moment. Somebody trying to claim to speak for God, especially because usually when people do that, it's because they're trying to be negative. They're trying to condemn and say, well, this obviously was sent because you guys did something wrong. And Shea, to what you started this whole thing off with is that there's places in the Bible where Jesus specifically says, no, suffering is not always a direct result of a person's personal sin. That's not how this happens. So when we can step back and say, there may not be a reason I'm going to understand, and God isn't necessarily going to tell me, we can kind of avoid doing this whole, ah, yes, God sent this because of, and then insert my pet peeve here.

### **Kevin Stone**

Shea, you use the word trap, and I think that's what this is. It's a trap that we can too easily fall into to play the blame game and to try to associate a specific natural disaster with a specific judgment from God on a certain group of people. And we just need to avoid that altogether.

### **Kevin Stone**

It came up in the Gospels, Luke chapter 13, I think it is where the tower in Siloam collapsed and some people were killed. And the natural tendency of people was to think that that was God's judgment on those sinful people that died in that accident. And Jesus said, do you suppose that they were greater sinners than anyone else in our country? Jesus says, no, but I tell you that unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. So Jesus said very clearly, no, that was not a specific judgment of God on those people, but it is an occasion to make us think about our need to repent.

### **Kevin Stone**

John chapter nine, in the man born blind, the disciples themselves got to thinking, well, this man must have sinned even in the womb prior to his birth or his parents sin. And so they're being judged with this blindness. And Jesus says, no, this blindness was not a judgment of God on anybody for a specific sin. It was rather allowed to happen in this man's life so that God could be glorified. So the glory of the Lord could be seen in this man through the miracle that Jesus was just about to perform.

### **Kevin Stone**

So we've got to be so careful and not try to be looking for reasons why God is judging a certain person through a wildfire, through a tornado, through an earthquake or whatever else. We just need to be faithful with the gospel, trust God's character and praise his name.

### **Jeff Laird**

We also have to remember that some people sometimes hear conversations like this and they miss a really important distinction, which is some people will say something like, well, you never want to blame God when bad things happen. Well, the word blame is sort of loaded. And usually what people mean is you're never willing to call God evil when something bad happens. That's sort of the subtext behind that when that happens. And to be clear, we're not doing that because you can't do that. He's the definition of good, but we are not saying that God has absolutely no involvement at all whatsoever, or he couldn't have done anything. Yes, God is responsible in a sense for everything that happens because everything that happens is something that he allows. We don't necessarily know why we can't necessarily claim that we do know why, even when he just allows it and doesn't cause it. But that's a nuance that we want to make sure people understand is that this is not about us saying, oh, God would never, God has nothing to do with God. Didn't know God. No, he knows he could. Sometimes he does. I don't know why he does in certain circumstances, but there's a huge difference between me acknowledging that God is sovereign and God is God and me blaming him in the sense of I am assigning evil to him. And that's the difference between what we want to do and what somebody like Job did, where Job was willing to say, I don't like this. I don't understand this. I hate this. But he never looked at God and said, you are sinful. You are wrong for what has happened. He was willing to admit that he was not the one making that decision. So it's a nuance I want to make sure people understand is we understand God is responsible in a sense for everything that happens, but there is no need or ability for us to morally blame God for these things.

### **Kevin Stone**

That's a good point, Jeff. Good distinction to make. Everything that happens falls within the providence of God. And he cannot be charged with evil, but yes, there are times that he does bring calamity into our world.

### **Shea Houdmann**

Kind of try to tie this all in as we close. Why does God allow natural disasters? I don't know. We can come up with lots of reasons. Sometimes in the Bible, God used them for judgment. We talked to some of the things that how it can cause us to remember this world is not our home. It can refocus our attitude. It can cause us to think of eternity. It can give churches and Christians opportunities to minister. It can bring people to faith in Christ. It can do all these sorts of things. But the natural disasters that happen in our world today, there's no way for us to know why specifically God allowed or caused this or that disaster. But the Bible is very clear on what our response should be. And so hopefully you hear that heart today, a heart of compassion for

those who suffered as a result of a natural disaster and a desire for Christians around the world to do the right thing and seek to minister in the right way in the midst of one.

**Shea Houdmann**

And two, since this episode is coming out right around the time of the California wildfires, nothing but compassion. So in the comments field on YouTube and at [podcast.gotquestions.com](http://podcast.gotquestions.com), I'll include a link to some aid organizations that Got Questions can wholeheartedly recommend if you want to give to support some of the ministry work that's going on in California, because I think that's super important right now.

**Shea Houdmann**

So Jeff, Kevin, thank you for joining me for this conversation. Hopefully our conversation was encouraging to you, helped you to understand a little bit more about what the Bible says about natural disasters and what our response should be. So it's been the Got Questions podcast on why does God allow natural disasters. Got Questions, the Bible has answers, and we'll help you find them.