Episode 125 Broken Planet

**Sharon Dirckx**

Hi, this is Sharon Dirckx, a freelance speaker, author and apologist.

**David Capes**

Dr Sharon Dirckx, Sharon, good to see you. Welcome to Yarnton.

**Sharon Dirckx**

It's a pleasure to be here.

**David Capes**

Last time we met, we were at the Lanier Theological Library, and you did a wonderful lecture for us around your book, *Am I Just My Brain?*. And today we're going to be talking about another book that you've written that has just been recently published here in 2023. It's entitled, *Broken Planet: If There's a God, Why are There Natural Disasters and Diseases*. And you solve that question? Right?

**Sharon Dirckx**

No, I definitely don’t solve it. I don't know that it's possible to solve such a complex question, but I certainly try and give some helpful responses.

**David Capes**

Now your first book is entitled *Why*. What is that book about?

**Sharon Dirckx**

So *Why?* is also about the question of if God exists and is good, then why is there suffering. But it's a more broad treatment of the subject, using the same style as *Broken Planet,* combining stories of people who believe in God, who are Christians, but have suffered in awful ways. And yet they continue to hold to belief in a good God with chapters that deal with apologetic argument and reasoning and why it still makes more sense to believe in God, even though our world is very broken. So *Why?* is a book on suffering as well, and *Broken Planet* focuses more on natural disasters.

**David Capes**

Your second book, *Am I Just My Brain?*, we did a podcast on that. You also came and did a lecture on that. And in the show notes, we're going to put information about how you can hear those and see those as well.

A number of years ago, I interviewed a doctor, a medical doctor, I think from Baltimore, Maryland. And he began to notice some things in his practice. He noticed certain diseases surfacing over and over again. And he ended up finally just leaving medicine and becoming an advocate for the planet. Because he said my real patient was the planet, not these people who were getting these diseases and having these maladies associated with the environment. So that became his life's work. Here in *Broken Planet*, I feel the same sense of what he was talking about. There's something wrong here. And you use natural disasters as a way of talking about that. What's the big idea of the book?

**Sharon Dirckx**

Yeah, I think that the big idea is that it still makes more sense that God exists than if he doesn't, even though we live on an incredibly broken planet. I mean, there are many different angles that I could come up with this. But actually, there are natural factors. There are human factors, but there are also spiritual factors that are playing into the brokenness that we see in our bodies, and also in the natural world.

**David Capes**

One of the things I like about the book is the way you interweave those stories throughout the book. How did you choose the people to interview and give their stories?

**Sharon Dirckx**

I was, at that point, part of an international organization that was able to connect me with different people around the world. I wanted to try and cover as many different kinds of natural disaster as I could. And so, I was looking for people that had particular experience of this disaster, and this kind of disaster, and those that spoke English and were able to articulate what had happened to them. And so it was kind of that, the people that responded to that interview. I interviewed more people than have gone into *Broken Planet*. In fact, quite a few more. So, I wasn't able to include every interview. But what we did was we interviewed them over zoom. So, there was a low carbon footprint rather than flying around the world. And that interview was recorded and transcribed, and then edited by me into a format that seemed to flow and make sense, that I thought would make sense to a reader. And then the person themselves gave their approval and consent to use their materials.

**David Capes**

You talk about tsunamis. You talk about locust invasions. You talk about earthquakes. I mean, just back in February of this year, there was an awful earthquake in Turkey and in Syria. And last report, I saw about 50,000 people had lost their lives in that event, and then subsequently, because they were beneath the rubble of these broken buildings.

**Sharon Dirckx**

Yes, absolutely. Yes. I mean, it was just so shocking to see the of number of deaths go up and up and just keep rising. And just really, really, really tragic. And one of the points that I make in my book is that, although we're not responsible for earthquakes, we're not even all that good at predicting them. I don't think, not like you can predict a tsunami or a hurricane. Right.

**David Capes**

But often the tsunamis come so quickly after the event, right. In the case of the one in Indonesia. It was just a few hours, it seems. After the event. And so how can you let people know what's coming? How can you make plans?

**Sharon Dirckx**

It is really tough. Yeah, it absolutely is. Although I think earthquakes are even harder. I think you have like a few seconds. I mean, you can say in general that a region is due an earthquake at any moment. But what does that actually means.

**David Capes**

You talked about Yellowstone National Park in the US, at one point in the book. And Cathy and I visited that last year. It was beautiful place. Amazing place. But yet thinking that all of that could at any moment blow to smithereens. It's frightening.

**Sharon Dirckx**

It is, it is. And yet you mentioned there, the beauty. There's a paradox involved in this that some of the mechanisms involved in natural disasters also can contribute to great natural beauty and sustain life. I mean, Yellowstone is teeming with life, and all kinds of extraordinary plants and animal life. And that's partly a result of the mineral based soil that it has formed from the volcanic activity. And so, while beauty is no substitute for a life that's lost in a natural disaster, it helps, it makes us realize that this question is more complicated than it might originally seem. In the case of earthquakes, tectonic plate activity is known to be necessary to sustain life. To recycle nutrients from deep beneath the earth's crust back to the surface. If we didn't have tectonic activity, then earth wouldn't be life sustaining in the way that it is.

**David Capes**

So a planet that doesn't have this kind of crust that we have, these plates moving, it's not likely to be able to sustain life,

**Sharon Dirckx**

It seems to be. Yeah, it seems to be although of course, a skeptic might say, well, why couldn't God have created a planet that sustained life but didn't require rippling streets and bodies buried beneath buildings. And of course, that's a valid question. I guess what we would say in this regard is that, it seems to be that if you set in motion a certain set of laws of nature, then other outcomes become more likely than if you set in motion, a planet that is tectonic and needs that kind of activity, then it becomes more likely that humans are going to be kind of caught up in that activity. And of course, it becomes a disaster when people are involved and get hurt and suffer and die. The activity on its own isn't right or wrong. There's nothing right or wrong about it. It seems necessary. But it's only when people get involved that they become disastrous.

**David Capes**

If a hurricane goes into South Texas, not far from us, where it's not populated, they don't send a news crew down there to take a look at it. But if it goes into Houston, one of the most populated cities, then it becomes real and may people die. Economies are destroyed, buildings are destroyed. There's the disaster when it involves people. So, the pandemic recently, we've been through the COVID pandemic, and there are discussions around was this a human made thing? Or was this just a natural movement of a virus from animal to human? I don't know that we can solve that. But sometimes people are involved in these things that are natural. Yes, somebody might start a fire, right, that becomes a big blaze and destroys homes and kills people.

**Sharon Dirckx**

Yes, well, absolutely. And one of the points that I make in my book, which is a really important one, is that there are human factors and natural factors. And although we're not necessarily responsible for or even can figure out how these things start and why they occur at all, we humans undoubtedly make them worse. So just momentarily going back to Turkey and Syria, we see that so many died because the buildings were not built to withstand earthquakes. And the reason they weren't is because regulations that were there, were short-cutted and people used cheaper materials, and didn't put steel into buildings. Meaning that they just wouldn't withstand an earthquake and people's apartment blocks pancaked. We saw that in Haiti in 2010, as well. And so human beings undoubtedly increase the suffering and add to the death toll when there's a natural disaster. And I think the same will be true in the pandemic that we will probably never really know how it started. Whether it was human experimentation or broke out in a Wuhan animal market. Who knows, but our inability to respond rapidly, our desire to kind of ignore lockdown regulations, which we saw in the UK, even at the level of government. Which has been, obviously an ongoing conversation. And even the impact of poverty, you know. Some people have had to be more exposed, more vulnerable, to the pandemic, and to the virus because they had front facing jobs that they had to continue with. People in medical services, people in care, teachers, and so on. And so, there are all kinds of factors that play into the impact that a natural disaster has. There are natural factors that seem to come from nature itself that seems to be beyond human control. And then there are human factors where we make things worse.

**David Capes**

It seems like the cities are the places where things get worse. If it's an earthquake in Gaziantep, for example, yes. But if it's out somewhere else, and fewer people are involved. Are we just too concentrated in cities you think?

**Sharon Dirckx**

It could be. And the geophysicist Robert White does make the point that increasing population density, and just generally the rise in global population makes it more likely that an earthquake or tsunami is going to affect a large number of people. Just because there's more people around than there were 200 years ago. What are we now past 8 billion?

**David Capes**

I think we're close to it.

**Sharon Dirckx**

There's something about just the number of people that are on earth and people have built in seismically active areas. You could take the Pacific Ring of Fire. I mean, there's a ton of people living in that area.

**David Capes**

Part of that is the beauty and the climate, often it's some of the best climate in the world.

**Sharon Dirckx**

Yes, yes. And yet they're seeing natural disaster after natural. You barely recovered from one and you've got another one. And I mean, hurricane after hurricane and tsunamis and flooding, and so on. And of course, as in countries like Bangladesh, you know, flooding is probably the most devastating kind of natural disaster. It doesn't have the drama of an earthquake, necessarily. It happens slowly, but it's so devastating. And I think millions are displaced through flooding and lack of infrastructure, which means that they're just sinking and rising sea levels.

**David Capes**

So how did someone who has a PhD from Cambridge in brain imaging, get interested in this broken planet?

**Sharon Dirckx**

Well, yeah, I think I wrote my first book, because although I was a scientist, and I wanted to write about scientific subject matter, I was also aware that suffering is in some ways, the biggest barrier to faith, the biggest question of all. And often behind a more intellectually focused scientific question about God might lie, a question to do with suffering. Perhaps coming from an experience of suffering or having seen someone else suffer. So, I just felt like that was the more important question to address and to address in a way that really engages people who wouldn't call themselves Christians. And so, I have tried to write books that someone that doesn't even know what they believe could pick up and read it and not feel alienated by the language or the approach, you know. I've tried to assume, not necessarily any belief in God in my writing. So that's partly why I started with suffering. And then natural disasters I felt like is the hardest kind of kernel of the question of suffering, because it's saying that there's something wired into nature itself that's broken. Well, if God is good, and he was the one that's supposedly created our good planet, why on earth did he make it that way? Why did he not make a planet that has no physical problems at all? No disease or sickness.

**David Capes**

You talk in here about the pain and the necessity of pain, and along with pain goes suffering. And I think you used the term moderate pain, as opposed to severe pain. Whether that's from a disease or whether that's from an accident, or earthquake or whatever. Why is pain necessary?

**Sharon Dirckx**

I think that's a great question. And I think that comes along in this section where I talk about, yes, it's all very well to say there are human factors, and there are natural factors, and there's life sustaining. And humans make them worse, and so on. But that doesn't get us away from the question. Why are there earthquakes at all? Why are there diseases at all? Why is it that our bodies are headed for decay, not for kind of further improvement? There's something wired into the way the natural world is, that calls for a deeper kind of explanation. And that's where I start to talk about spiritual factors.

**David Capes**

That science can't really touch.

**Sharon Dirckx**

That science can't really touch and was never intended to touch. And actually, you know, that's what gets me into the fact that there is something wrong with the world that we live in. There is something inherently wrong. And, you know, Romans talks about nature groaning and being in pains of childbirth. Not in a finished state. In a state of transition. A woman in labor is not in a finished state. And there is more to come. And actually, that's the Christian theistic picture. That there's more to come, we're not done, God isn't done yet with the world that he has made. And so, one of the other indicators of that, as you rightly point out is from Genesis. One of the arguments is the reason for the brokenness is that the human decision to turn away from God has introduced the brokenness, into not just human behavior, but also human biology. And the natural world itself. And, actually, one of the things that we see is that God says to Eve that her pains in childbirth will increase. You know that there's an impact on biology, from turning away from God. It doesn't say that the birth pains will begin. It says they will greatly increase, which is interesting, which gets to the question of why moderate pain might have had some beneficial role, even in Eden. Even before that human rebellion against God. That pain alerts us, moderate physical pain alerts us to danger. It alerts us. You know, we have pain sensors in our hands. In our skin, in general, that kind of alerts us to our environment so that there's preservation. And when that deteriorates, actually you see in the condition of leprosy that there's so much damage caused because there's no ability to sense pain.

**David Capes**

People can just sort of wear away at that point. Not aware that they've injured something.

**Sharon Dirckx**

Yes, exactly. I don't know how far to take the illustration there as well. I know that in terms of the things that we go through in life in general, that sometimes God can use our suffering for good. But I don't believe that the good that can come out of it is necessarily the reason that it happened. And so moderate pain can point us to what's really important in life. It can point us to the things that perhaps we had out of kilter. It can point us to God and our need for relationship with Him. And God can certainly use that.

**David Capes**

And that often happens when a group of people go through some kind of disaster. They often begin thinking and turning to God at least short term. They turn to God. Churches fill up again. Maybe mosques as well, and synagogues. Who knows?

But it's a brilliant book. I really would commend people to take a look at it. One person who endorsed the book is Sean McDowell. He said "This is my new go to book on the natural problem of evil". It's a great book. *Broken Planet, If There is a God, Then Why Are There Natural Disasters and Diseases* by Sharon Derickx. Sharon, thanks for being with us today on the Stone Chapel.

**Sharon Dirckx**

Thank you very much.

**David Capes**

Standby for a nugget of wisdom from Dr. Sharon Derrick's. . . .Do you have something?

**Sharon Dirckx**

I do I do. I actually do!

“Laughter”

**Sharon Dirckx**

Not unrelated to the topic of natural disasters. I want to just remind people that you matter to God. Often when we think about a disaster, we think of people in a far-off part of the world. And that can sometimes lead us to think that our problems don't matter to God but actually God's arms and hands are big enough to cope with it all. So, bring your suffering to him. You matter to God.