

İsmail Kulakç1ođlu

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Yazar/Writer: İsmail Kulakçiođlu

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Davutpařa Cad. Emintař Kazım Dinçol San.

Sit. No: 81/87 Topkapı, İstanbul - Trkiye

Tel. (0212) 567 89 92-93

E-mail: yaybilgi@gmail.com

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Davutpařa Cad. Kazım Dinçol San. Sit.

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*To all those who lost their lives in the February 6, 2023
earthquake and to all those who continue to live with the
pain that it brought...*



İsmail Kulakçioğlu was born in 1964. He completed his BA at Whitefield & Martin Bucer Seminary and his master's degree in applied theology at TCMI.

He served as the term president of the Association of Protestant Churches from 2012 to 2015.

He has authored print, digital, and audio books titled “Financial Consciousness, Offering, Tithing, and Donations in the Bible, Repentance; What is the Proclamation in Christianity and Islam?; Homosexuality According to the Bible; Family and Marriage Bonds; Priestly Magic: Witchcraft, Mediumship, and Fortune Telling.” His print and digital books have reached 150,000 people.

He became interested in human rights in 2016 and gained experience acting according to Turkey's conditions. He is an active human rights advocate, continuing the "hakveinsan" project. He has been serving as a Protestant pastor at the

Bursa Protestant Church since 2001. He is married and has two children.

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PREFACE

In the early hours of February 6, 2023, at 04:17 and again at 13:24, two earthquakes measuring 7.7 and 7.6 struck, with their epicenters in the Pazarcık and Elbistan districts of Kahramanmaraş. The earthquakes affected the provinces of Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, Osmaniye, Adıyaman, Diyarbakır, Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Kilis, Adana, Malatya, and Elazığ. Among these provinces, Hatay was the most severely affected in terms of both loss of life and destruction.

According to official figures, more than 50,000 people lost their lives and over 100,000 were injured. It was announced that the number of deaths in Hatay alone accounted for about half of the total

fatalities—approximately 25,000 people—and that the number of injured exceeded 30,000. Many of those who witnessed the earthquake, as well as a significant number of civilians who went to the affected areas to provide aid after the destruction, believe that these figures do not fully reflect reality.

Six days after the earthquake, with the support of our church, we went from Bursa to the Besni district of Adiyaman province. As we approached the disaster area, my first observation on the highway was that ambulances, hearses, and heavy construction machinery used to remove debris—coming from different parts of Turkey—were returning. I thought to myself, “*Hope is fading.*”

No matter how extensive the rescue efforts and the delivery of food and other aid may be, they fall far short of expressing the emotional trauma experienced by those who survived the earthquake. Even though three years have passed, survivors are still living not only with the difficulties of securing housing and meeting basic needs, but also with earthquake-related anxiety and fear—experiences we hesitate to describe merely as “emotional trauma”—as well as the pain of their losses.

First the official authorities, and then society as a whole, should feel responsible—out of human compassion—for enabling earthquake survivors to keep their hope alive, so that humanity itself does not die as well.

Unfortunately, in order to prevent the subject from becoming too, the book has been limited in scope. It may not be able to provide the expected response to the needs of the relatives of those who lost their lives, or to those who have suffered physical and emotional trauma due to the earthquake. However, for our brothers and sisters who have endured this painful experience, it can remind us of our social responsibilities, renew our sensitivity, and offer hope that trauma can be overcome.

As I write these lines today, I am looking at the label “HOPE” that I have taped to my computer. I find myself thinking, “Hope must always exist—how terrifying life without hope must be.”

İsmail Kulakçiođlu

19.12.2025 / Bursa



THAT MOMENT¹

Many people were asleep, but some were not. One of them was Brother H., who lived in İskenderun. He was a baker. For this reason, he used to get up early in the mornings and go to work. On the morning of February 6, he got up early as usual. His wife was awake; he said goodbye to her, looked at the many others who were still asleep, and for some reason left the house without even drinking his morning coffee. He got on his bicycle and set off toward the bakery where he worked.

¹ Photograph: <https://www.medyatikbakis.com/6-subat-2023-depremi-sonrasi-iskenderun-ve-hatayda-rezerv-alan-sorunu/> (02.07.2025)

As he was nearing the bakery, suddenly everything began to shake... He fell off his bicycle. Buildings were swaying. After the buildings collapsed, dust covered everything. When he got back on his feet, he could barely see because of the dust. All around him there was massive destruction and the voices of people crying out for help.

Brother H. rode his bicycle and hurried back home. He was struggling to put into words the complex emotions of that moment and what followed. The building where his home was located had completely collapsed. The floors of the five-story building had pancaked into one another, leaving no space or distinction between levels. He climbed onto the rubble and began calling out to his wife and children... He kept calling... He kept calling...

This calling went on for hours; no one answered his cries. No help came either. He was trying to reach his wife and two children trapped beneath the rubble. The people who emerged from the surrounding buildings were like him. Those who survived had done so by their own means.

Brother H. thought of looking for a pair of bolt cutters. He remembered a few construction sites nearby and hurried to them. At last, he found a pair of bolt cutters and returned to his collapsed home. Using his hands and the bolt cutters, he tried to make his way deeper into the wreckage of the fallen building. His voice was hoarse

from calling out, yet without losing hope, he kept trying to reach his wife and children...

The second earthquake, which occurred at 13:24, increased the destruction of buildings, the number of deaths, and the fears of those who survived. The rainy weather and the temperature dropping below freezing at night deepened the sense of helplessness. Brother H. later learned from the autopsy that his daughter had died immediately in the collapsed building, while his wife and son died several days later. They had been able to withstand the rain and the cold for a few days. "If we had been able to reach them quickly, perhaps they would be alive today," says Brother H.

I asked Brother H. about the trauma he experienced after the earthquake and how his pain still affects him today. He grows lost in thought as he looks at the photographs of his wife and children that he hung inside the container. "We are alive, but I cannot forget," he said. "They are dead, and I am trying to cling to life despite deprivation."

Brother H. is struggling with housing problems. At the time this book was being written, he was still living in a container. Since he was a tenant, he did not even own the house that was destroyed. For this reason, he was unable to benefit from the facilitated opportunities related to acquiring housing.

Housing is a basic human need, and Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that everyone has the right to a home that ensures conditions for a life in dignity. This right is defined not only for earthquake victims but for all people. In order for individuals to live humanely in a safe environment, it is the fundamental duty of the state to provide necessities such as food, clothing, and medical care.



THE FIRST 72 HOURS: Where Was the State?²

Even the state did not expect such massive destruction. When news of the event began to spread, the scale of the devastation was far greater than anticipated. However, in the face of this unforeseen catastrophe, the preparedness of the relevant public institutions and non-governmental organizations was almost nonexistent. It appears that the first 24 hours were spent largely trying to grasp the extent of the damage caused by the earthquake and to coordinate relief efforts:

² Photograph: <https://t24.com.tr/haber/saatler-4-17-de-durmustu-6-subat-depremlerinin-uzerinden-tam-bir-yil-gecti-magduriyetler-suruyor-depremedeler-isyanda,1150461> (14.07.2025)

About an hour after the earthquake, official statements were issued. AFAD began dispatching and deploying rescue teams to the earthquake zone.

By 08:42, there had been 34 aftershocks in the region with a magnitude above 4. These aftershocks caused great fear and panic among the public. Rescue efforts for those trapped under the rubble were carried out entirely through individual, personal efforts. Those who recount the first 72 hours focus on the cries of “Help!” from people fighting for life and death.

The state was virtually absent on the ground. Survivors struggle to put into words the helplessness they experienced in their testimonies. “For some people, death was a release,” they say.



FROM 04:17 TO 13:24, THE SECOND MAJOR EARTHQUAKE³

The second earthquake, which occurred at 13:24, increased both the loss of life and the spiritual and material devastation. In Hatay, the family had survived the earthquake at 04:17. Their apartment building was heavily damaged but had not collapsed. Their survival was a miracle. Despite the ongoing aftershocks that posed serious risks, they decided—trusting in another miracle—to go back into their home to retrieve their valuables. It seemed they had achieved

³ Photograph: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/asrin-felaketi/depremde-hasar-goren-binalara-esya-cikarmak-icin-girmeyin-uyarisi-/2823408>
(14.07.2025)

their goal. However, during the second earthquake at 13:24, a 7.6-magnitude quake centered in Elbistan, their heavily damaged building collapsed. They themselves were trapped under the rubble. Hoping for yet another miracle, they cried out “Help us” for hours.

No help came.

Those who carried out rescue efforts with their own limited means were confronted with a new sense of helplessness and pain. Those outside the rubble did everything they could—indeed, even more than they thought possible. When some of the people reached were found alive, it was a bittersweet joy, where smiles were mixed with tears. Many earthquake survivors say, “It is not easy to describe such a feeling. On one side, there is the struggle to hold on to life; on the other, the screams, and everything that was lost had fallen into silence.”

There was nothing that could be done for those who had died. The groans of the injured were heartbreaking. Mr. F later described the moments related to his neighbor’s cries for help as follows:

“We had gone outside. We were like everyone else who had survived. We had no equipment to help those trapped under the rubble. There was very little we could do. The cries of those whose limbs were pinned under the debris but who still had a high chance of survival were different. An indescribable pain was carried in those

cries—a sound filled with agony that no one would ever want to hear.

The adjacent building had collapsed. Aftershocks continued, and it was impossible to enter the ruined building. My friend Z. cried out in pain for almost a day—crying, crying, crying. Eventually he began to shout, ‘Shoot me,’ ‘Shoot me!’

Helplessness is a universal feeling. Sometimes death does not come easily or quietly. More than a year has passed, yet that voice has not left my ears:

‘Shoot me!’”



2. Earthquake Epicenter: Elbistan⁴

WHY ARE THE FIRST 72 HOURS AFTER AN EARTHQUAKE IMPORTANT?

Following the Pazarcık and Elbistan earthquakes, tremors continued in Hatay, Adıyaman, Gaziantep, Diyarbakır, and Elazığ, including their districts and rural areas. Although these subsequent earthquakes were not as large as the first two, they continued to impact the region in the form of loss of life, injuries, damage to buildings, and psychological trauma.

⁴ Photograph: “The epicenter of the second earthquake was Elbistan, which appears like a ‘ghost city’ at night” – <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cmmv145pmj9o> (22.12.2025)

When we think of those who were struggling for their lives beneath the rubble of collapsed buildings, every second of delay in extending a helping hand is a second too late. The words of an earthquake survivor shown in a news image — “You came too late; why didn’t you come earlier?” — are a painful expression of this stark reality.⁵



⁵ News headline: ““You came too late; why didn’t you come earlier?”” <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cmmv145pmj9o> (22.12.2025)

The first 72 hours after the disaster, known as the “golden hours,” determined Türkiye’s agenda... In the Pazarçık and Elbistan earthquakes, the response was far from ideal in terms of proper intervention.

The horror of what was experienced confronted many people with themselves for different reasons. On Türkiye’s agenda were our brothers and sisters directly affected by the earthquake and the question, “What should be done in such a situation?”

Unfortunately, the first 72 hours are spent in a period when people must be prepared to fend for themselves. We learned this during a seminar we held for our congregation on earthquake preparedness. Our speaker explained that, depending on the scale of natural disasters, rescue efforts, coordination for first aid, and communication among people are essential. If your home can withstand an earthquake, identifying safe spots and securing cabinets are among the tasks that should be done before an earthquake.

When we think about those who lost their lives or were left disabled after jumping out of windows during the earthquake, it becomes clear that adopting the correct body position is necessary, and this is a correct action that must be taken by the individual, not the state.

“Taking shelter by making yourself as small as possible next to items such as wardrobes, sofas, beds, or tables—which can help create a void within the rubble in places known as a ‘survivable space’—appears to be the most suitable option among the available choices. In the interview section of this book, the story of Hakan K. and his wife will be told: during the earthquake, while moving from their own bedroom to the room where their children were, they were trapped under the debris and lost their lives, whereas their children survived thanks to the survivable space created by the bed.”

For earthquakes that could cause large-scale destruction similar to the Kahramanmaraş and Elbistan earthquakes, it was recommended that in easily accessible places there should first be water, then a battery-powered radio for communication, a flashlight with spare batteries, first-aid supplies, and a raincoat. To these a small hand tool with an axe on one side and a hammer on the other can also be added.

Aftermath...

In fact, in major earthquakes there is no straightforward, “two plus two equals four” route for rescue teams to arrive quickly. Those who survived and managed to save themselves with their own means faced a lack of basic necessities such as water and food, clothing, and shelter. In the Maraş–Elbistan earthquake, in Hatay and its surroundings—among the areas most severely affected by the

destruction—the drop in air temperature and the onset of snowfall brought another unexpected problem: death from hypothermia.

Among earthquake victims, hypothermia occurred when body temperature fell to around 20 degrees Celsius in freezing conditions, while wearing wet clothes. Sadly, helpless people trapped under the rubble froze to death.



THIEVES!⁶

In the first days after the earthquake, reports of looting began to appear in the media. Normally, such acts would not even cross most people’s minds, and they caused great shock. Thieves and looters—some of them including public officials—who came both locally and from different cities under the pretense of providing aid, proved through their actions that virtues had been exhausted.

Following tips received by police patrols, three individuals who were stealing “by breaking into houses where no one was present” were apprehended. According to an online report by Anadolu

⁶ Photograph: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/hatayda-deprem-nedeniyle-bosaltilan-evlerden-hirsizlik-yapan-3-kisi-gozaltina-alindi/2815307> (28.12.2024)

Agency dated February 11, 2023, the vehicle of these individuals contained “USD 68,000, 1,300 riyals, 10 gold rings, 3 earrings, 7 bracelets, a necklace, 8 grams of gold, and 5 bottles of alcohol, found in bags and pouches.”

Undoubtedly, this was not the only case of looting in the region. In the provinces of Adana, Kahramanmaraş, Adıyaman, Malatya, and others, earthquake looters also emerged. Some were caught, while the others are still living among us!

ONE WEEK LATER – ADIYAMAN / BESNİ



The February 6 earthquake deeply affected Türkiye and the world. Many individuals, institutions, and civil society organizations were searching for ways to help with extraordinary sensitivity. Both our Church and citizens of various countries were asking how they could assist, particularly regarding access to the disaster area and the urgent needs there.

We purchased winter undergarments and items such as thermal socks, and on February 12, Güven and I set out toward the Besni district of Adiyaman province. After Haymana, when we entered the highway, the first thing that caught our attention was that heavy construction machinery and ambulances coming from other cities were turning back. Although rescue efforts were still ongoing, we realized that in some places hope had been exhausted, and we felt deep sorrow.

Along the way, until we reached Besni, we could see the devastating impact of the earthquake more clearly. In some of the collapsed buildings, it seemed almost impossible for anyone to have survived. Many buildings that had not collapsed gave the impression that they were at risk of doing so. Even today, it is truly difficult to make sense of—and to convey—the emptiness in the eyes and on the faces of the earthquake survivors waiting for hot food in front of the tents where warm meals were distributed in every settlement we passed.

We joined the team distributing aid at the State Hospital cafeteria in Besni and contributed to the food distribution. Even though seven days had passed since the earthquake, there was still chaos (and it cannot be said that Besni was affected by the earthquake as severely as Hatay and its surroundings). Nevertheless, despite the ongoing chaos, the distribution of hot meals, sandwiches, and water continued in a way that met the needs.

While we were handing out sandwiches at a dinner, a relief team that had come from Urfa brought kavurma.⁷ The food distribution team had no idea that kavurma would be coming. In fact, those who brought the kavurma didn't really know why they had brought it there either. In the end, we started distributing the

⁷ Kavurma: braised meat cubes browned in its own fat.

kavurma, and I think that was what truly mattered. Having a better meal option made everyone there happy.

In Besni, a significant portion of those receiving food were relatives of patients being treated in the hospital or people searching for their loved ones in the morgue.



WHERE IS GOD?

Frankly, it may not be possible to give a clear-cut answer to such a question. In fact, definitive responses that reflect a particular worldview—such as calling an earthquake “God’s punishment”—can push those who have experienced trauma into even deeper pain. One could say that the last thing people going through such hardship expect are philosophical explanations or shallow religious rhetoric.

In difficult times, people are more likely to question where God is or what God is doing in the midst of such hardship. I believe that many of those who experienced the February 6 earthquake directly, as well as those who witnessed it from afar, went through this kind of questioning.

My faith reflects a biblical Christian perspective. It may not be perfect, but in difficult circumstances the most meaningful explanation I can find for “where God is or what God is doing” may be possible by trying to understand God’s place in the universe and His perspective toward humanity.

First of all, according to the truth of the Holy Scriptures (the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel), everything in eternity is subject to God’s will. If this were not so, He would not be God.

Second, God exists eternally and is Spirit. The human mind, however, can make logical inferences only about the material world that falls within its field of perception. Compared to the greatness of creation, the human mind is extremely limited.⁸

Thirdly, God created human beings in His own image and made them immortal. That is, in terms of consciousness, will, emotion, and holiness, human beings derive their moral qualities from God. However, because Adam and Eve did not obey and were driven into disobedience by their desire to be like God, death came upon humanity. The human being, who was created immortal, fell under the sentence of death because of his own erroneous decision. And the consequence of sin—death—is passed on from one human being to another like a hereditary disease. However, despite this, God prepared a plan of salvation so that humanity might have eternal life and offered it in Christ. In broad terms, the plan of salvation can be summarized as follows:

⁸ “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.” The Bible, John 4:24

- The Torah, Genesis chapters 1–3: God the Creator, the creation of humanity, the fall of humankind; Genesis 3:15, the plan of salvation in the Messiah.⁹
- The Gospel, Matthew 1:23: “Mary will give birth to a son, and you shall name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

The meaning of the name Jesus: “YHWH saves.”

- The Bible, Romans 5:1–2: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith [counted as righteous], we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of attaining¹⁰ the glory of God.”
- The Bible, Rev. 21-22, states that when Jesus Christ returns, His corrupted creation will be restored: “Behold, the

⁹ “I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. Her offspring [the Messiah] will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

¹⁰ Attaining God’s glory: When Jesus Christ returns, the consciousness, will, emotions, and—within the context of holiness—the moral qualities of those who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation will be irrevocably restored to the likeness of God.

dwelling place of God is among men, and God will dwell among them. They will be his people, and God himself will be in them. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, nor mourning, nor crying, nor pain, for the former things have passed away. [...] Nothing unclean will enter there, nor anyone who has done abominable or deceitful things, but only those whose names are written in the book of the Lamb [Jesus] life.”¹¹

Ultimately, God has removed the judgment of death through faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, when we view events as God does—from the perspective of eternity—we can offer a meaningful answer to the problem of evil and to the sufferings experienced in this world.

¹¹ Rev.21:3-4, 27

PROVIDING SUPPORT TO THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA¹²

In addition to urgent needs such as water, food, medical care, and shelter, providing support to those experiencing physical and psychological trauma may not always be seen as a priority. However, unresolved traumatic experiences affect people more deeply than expected, causing fear, stress, loss of trust, anxiety, insomnia, and depression. Trauma experts and professional practitioners consider counseling services provided in the first days after the trauma to be highly valuable, because after 30 days the traumatic experience becomes embedded in a person's life and moves into a different stage.

The brochure prepared by Anadolu University's Psychological Counseling and Guidance Center has effectively summarized several important points.¹³

- **Derealization:** feeling that the event is not real, both during the incident and afterward; an inability to believe it happened.

¹² The section was written in accordance with the recommendations of experts specializing in trauma counseling.

¹³ cf. <https://cdn.anadolu.edu.tr/files/anadolu-cms/ZLeG5IOW/file/081ba1488127aa46/psikolojik-travma.pdf> (29.12.2025)

- Depersonalization: becoming alienated from oneself, feeling unable to recognize oneself; loss of sense of time.
- Re-experiencing past fears: the re-emergence of fears experienced in the past.
- Experiencing trauma-related physical reactions such as heart palpitations, rapid breathing, sweating, muscle tension, headaches, and nausea.
- Episodes of fear and anxiety.
- Restlessness and blaming others due to anger.
- Intensely experiencing feelings of sadness and guilt upon realizing one's helplessness.
- Avoiding things that remind one of the event.
- Loss of trust: because of the scale of the destruction and the suffering endured, feeling that the world is more unsafe than it actually is.

During the February 6th earthquake, some people experienced the reactions listed above more intensely, while others experienced them to a lesser degree. Although the first 30 days are crucial in trauma counseling, these people were often left on their own with their grief and their struggle to survive.

In the same brochure, the question “What kinds of problems do traumatic experiences cause in daily life?” is asked, and answers to this question are explored. If psychological trauma is not resolved within 30 days, it is assessed as Acute Stress Disorder. This means the continuation of symptoms mentioned in the previous sections,

such as alienation from oneself, anxiety and fear, a tendency to withdraw and be alone, insomnia, anger, and the persistence or reactivation of physical reactions.

What can be done?

There is no easy answer to this question. Traditional phrases such as “*My condolences,*” “*Life goes on,*” or “*It is divine will*” are often as meaningless as they are ineffective in healing emotional trauma. Instead, it is considered a more appropriate and accepted approach to support those who are grieving in holding on to life, and to convey—through words as well as body language—that you genuinely sense and share their feelings.

* * *

In the first week after the earthquake, I asked a trauma counselor who went to the disaster area, “What was your first impression when you arrived in the earthquake zone?” The true story below summarizes this section:

“While flying to Adana, a child on the plane kept shouting from time to time, ‘Help! Help!’ Although Adana was not severely affected by the earthquake, this child was affected by it.

A town had been reduced to rubble. No help arrived for three days. Those who experienced the destruction and the losses were suffering deep trauma. On the one hand, they were trying to

hold on to life themselves; on the other, they were trying to reach their loved ones trapped under the rubble. We conducted group therapy with them. After the program, there was hope on their faces. They said, ‘We came out of the darkness into the light.’”

Question: “What were the greatest needs?”

“For three days no one came. There was a need for water, shelter, and support.

In one province we visited, a person we provided therapy to could not sleep at night and was unable to enter houses. While listening to their memories, the person began to recall an event from their childhood. When this person was a child, their father had died. After the earthquake, the death of the father was unconsciously reactivated, confronting the person with death.

When they went with the relief team and saw deceased relatives, they reacted in ways similar to their reactions in childhood. During the therapy session, the person began to cry.

We prayed, and the fears such as being unable to enter houses, as well as the insomnia, disappeared.”

GOD'S MERCY

While spirituality is important, merely speaking to wounded, suffering people about “God’s mercy” or “God’s love” may not be very consoling. However, for people of faith, not understanding God can also be troubling. For without hope, life is meaningless for humans. Trusting in the living, healing word of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit opens a door to eternity.

The Hebrew words *hesed* (Greek *charis*) and *hanan* found in the Holy Scriptures (the Torah, Psalms, and the Gospel) encompass meanings such as compassion, mercy, love, faithfulness, loyalty, kindness, and being gracious and merciful to the undeserving. However, those going through difficult circumstances will not be able to understand God unless they view Him, His plans, and His character in the context of eternity. For God’s promise is that when Christ returns, He will remove death, mourning, weeping, and suffering, and restore the corrupted creation.

Like every human, Christians also share in the brokenness of creation! What sets them apart from others is the hope found in these verses:

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For our

light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”¹⁴

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

CONTAINERS

Although containers provided a temporary solution to the housing problem, the lack of proper planning and inadequate infrastructure failed to offer ideal conditions for earthquake survivors who had already experienced severe trauma. In many areas, drainage systems became clogged during rainy weather, causing flooding, and many containers were flooded from above. During cold weather, serious problems were experienced with heating.

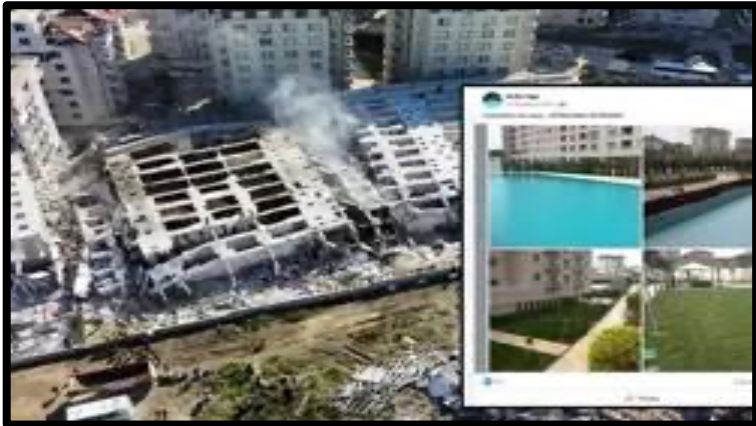
In the early days, aid was abundant, but over time the assistance—both from the state and from non-governmental organizations—declined. Today, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the victims of February 6th have almost been forgotten. These people are left alone with their own pain, fears, and anxieties.



As we mentioned in the previous section, "supporting those who are deeply saddened to hold on to life" is not a matter that can be resolved in a few weeks, months, or years. Initially, it is essential to improve living conditions by meeting shelter and food needs; subsequently, creating employment opportunities and ensuring the continuity of professional trauma counseling are crucial.

IF BUILDINGS HAD BEEN EARTHQUAKE-RESISTANT?

In the February 6, 2023 earthquake, 38,901 buildings collapsed on the same day. In 11 provinces, a total of 518,000 housing units were either destroyed or severely damaged. In addition, 128,778 housing units suffered moderate damage. The collapse of the Rönensans Residence buildings deeply concerned the public. Apartments marketed as “A Corner of Paradise” became graves for hundreds of people. The residents of the complex experienced hell as the buildings tilted and collapsed backward.¹⁵



¹⁵ Photograph: <https://www.dha.com.tr/haberleri/ronesans-rezidans> (01.01.2026)

The trial concerning the Rönensans Residence is ongoing. Some people in the collapsed building were never reached and were recorded as missing. A witness in the case, who was rescued two days later, stated:

“The collapse of the building happened so quickly that before I could tell my niece and my sister, ‘The earthquake is very strong,



let’s get under a column,’ we were already crushed by the collapse. After the collapse, we spoke with my niece and my sister, asking, ‘Are you okay?’ My niece kept saying, ‘I can’t breathe.’ We kept talking from time to time...

We received no news from my sister and my niece, and we could find no trace of them.”¹⁶

TMMOB, in the earthquake report it prepared, stated that although buildings being located on fault lines increases the risks, the main problems were identified as:

¹⁶ Photograph: <https://www.dha.com.tr/foto-galeri/depremde-269-kisinin-oldugu-cennetten-bir-kose-sloganiyla-daire-satilan-ronensans-rezidans-davasi-basladi-2423589/9> (01.01.2026)

- a) the use of improper materials,
- b) despite calculating the vertical loads of buildings, failing to perform seismic calculations, and the failure to apply the required stirrup densification specified in the regulations in force since 1968.

The Hatay TMMOB building, which has become a symbol of the buildings that did not collapse in the earthquake, was constructed without the above-mentioned faults. This report states that “in buildings where the concrete strength is only half of what was specified in the project, where the reinforcement bars have corroded due to the use of sea sand in the concrete, and where less than half of the required reinforcement (steel bars) according to the project was installed, the soil has no role in the earthquake damage and collapse.”

The full report can be read at the following link:

<file:///C:/Users/Admin/Pictures/6%20%C5%9Eubat%20resimler/8624,deprem-rapor-2-webpdf%20TMMO%2001.01.2026.pdf>

LOST CULTURAL HERITAGE¹⁷



The geography of Anatolia has, since ancient times, reflected a rare cultural mosaic in which the beliefs, traditions, music, cuisine, and bonds of Christians, Muslims, Alevis, Arab Alevis, and other groups have been deeply intertwined. Apart from political and demographic interventions, the people of the region had learned to live together in peace and brotherhood. With the February 6th earthquakes, people of different identities and faiths shared the same pain.

With the earthquake, historical heritage was also reduced to rubble. Although positive progress has been made in the rescue efforts, it appears very difficult to recover all of the destroyed historical heritage.

¹⁷ Photograph: <https://gazeteoksijen.com/turkiye/6-subat-depremlerinde-antakyadaki-rum-ortodoks-kilisesi-de-yikildi-171402> (02.01.2026)

INTERVIEW WITH CEM & GÜNAY KONUR

Who is he? Cem Konur.

I was born in İskenderun in 1984. After graduating from university, I worked in several different places. Later, in response to the Lord's calling, I began serving in church ministry. I got married in 2018, and now I have a son. Together with my family, I continue to serve the Lord.

In the chapters of the book, I briefly mentioned how the earthquake affected you and your spouse. Now we'd like to hear from you: What happened during the first three hours starting at 4:17?

The earthquake was so intense that it woke us up immediately. My wife first brought our son to us. We were shaking so violently that we could hear the walls cracking. Shock and fear kept us from getting out of bed. In helplessness, we held on to each other and prayed for the shaking to stop.

When the tremors ended, we were about to grab something to put on and go outside, but then several phone calls came in. My sister, who lives out of town, told us that our brother's house had

collapsed. We experienced another shock. My wife's sibling's house had also collapsed.

We immediately started walking quickly toward my brother's house. Everything was dark, and the weather was cold and rainy. We walked for about 15 minutes, and as we went on, we saw how dire the situation was and how devastating the earthquake had been.

When we arrived at the apartment building where my sibling lived, I experienced another shock. We saw that the five-story building had collapsed into what looked like a single floor. My father and I immediately climbed onto the rubble and began searching for our loved ones.

From the top we heard a voice crying out, "Help, help." As we moved closer to the sound, we saw my nephew through a small opening. His bed and wardrobe had formed a triangle, trapping him inside. We quickly called a few others for help and managed to pull him out. He was completely soaked and trembling from the cold and fear.

We asked the neighbors for clothes and blankets and tried to warm him with whatever we could find. We wanted to take him to the hospital for a check-up, but people around us said not to take him unless there was something serious, because the state hospital had collapsed and the private hospitals were overflowing with the injured. A nurse who was there examined my nephew and said there

was nothing to be worried about. We left him with my mother and climbed back onto the rubble to continue searching for my sibling and my spouse. Meanwhile, my spouse had gone to his own sibling's home and was searching the rubble there for his nephews.

During this period, what did you feel the greatest need for?

First of all, we looked for a professional search and rescue team. While searching for our loved ones among the piles of concrete, our hands were badly injured, and I also sprained my ankle. When no teams arrived and our own efforts proved limited, we immediately searched for machines that could help us cut through the steel bars and lift the concrete, but unfortunately we couldn't find any. A few hours after the earthquake, my son said he was hungry and thirsty, but sadly, in those first hours we couldn't find any water or food.

How did the 13:24 earthquake centered in Ekinözü affect İskenderun? What were you doing at that moment? Nearly three years have passed—can you still remember it?

I remember it as if it happened yesterday. Just before this earthquake, we had found the bodies of my sibling and their spouse, but we couldn't remove them because heavy concrete slabs were on top of them. We were also soaked from the rain; as we were climbing down from the rubble to rest a bit and warm ourselves, we were caught in this earthquake. The neighboring buildings shook so

violently that they almost collapsed on top of us. I think because of the exhaustion and shock after hours of strain, we didn't give this earthquake much importance. In any case, we experienced many aftershocks for days.

You made a great effort to rescue your brother and his family. What did you do? What was the outcome?

We were only able to get my brother and his wife out thanks to excavators and search-and-rescue teams, and unfortunately this was possible only on the third day. We put a lot of pressure on the relief teams and had many arguments to get them to take action. If we had not been persistent, they might have remained under the rubble for several more days. After my brother and his wife were recovered from beneath the debris, we obtained a prosecutor's report and then laid them to rest.

When you think about what you experienced and what you witnessed, how would you describe the sense of helplessness?

The people you love most, whom you value deeply—your own flesh and blood—need you more than ever, yet it feels as if your hands and arms are tied and you can do nothing. You do not know what will happen next, and you are left simply waiting.

I would like to ask your spouse: Could you describe the first 48 hours from your own perspective?

The first 48 hours were marked by shock. I did not fully understand what was happening. One after another, we received news of the deaths of our loved ones. We saw that those who survived were trapped under the rubble and that we needed to help them. But there was nothing we could do to help. The screams coming from all over the city are still ringing in my ears. I can never forget my little nephew screaming in pain beneath the rubble.

The hospitals were full; wounded people were dying on the ground, covered in blood. In the city, there were fires on one side, people who had died under the rubble on another, and people crying and screaming everywhere. It reminded me of the post-war scenes in the film *The Pianist*. It felt as if we were truly inside a war that had lasted for years.

There are four hospitals in İskenderun—two private and two public. After we recovered my



nephew's body from the rubble, we applied to all four hospitals to keep the child's body in the morgue for one night. However, when we went to the hospitals, we were not allowed to enter beyond the morgue doors. There was no permission, but still, with the hope of finding a place for my nephew, we went into the morgues anyway.

In the morgues we were able to enter, there was no space at all; they were filled with bodies whose identities had not even been determined. In all four hospitals, the morgues were in the same condition. For burial in the Christian cemetery, permission had to be obtained from Catholic Church officials. They did not grant permission for the child to be buried in the Catholic Cemetery.

We were forced to bring the child's body home. The body remained in the house for one night. We had to take the body out of the house so that it would not begin to smell. At the same time, there were children in the house—my son and my wife's niece—who were terrified.

Early in the morning, 24 hours after the earthquake, we went back to the cemetery to find a place where we could put the body. We were not allowed to carry out a burial, but they showed us a storage facility.

They said, "You can leave the body here for one night."

When I went inside, I was shocked. The huge storage room was filled with bodies, and there was no place to step. I had to step over

the bodies and force myself to find a tiny space for my baby. Those 48 hours are something I will never forget for the rest of my life. It was the most vivid example showing me how temporary and empty life can be.

Cem, when I turn back to you again, as a pastor, what were the things that challenged you in your church and in the wider community?

Many people's lives were disrupted. There were those who asked, "Where is God?"

While we ourselves were in pain and in need of comfort, we began to be a source of comfort to others and tried to give them hope. Of course, everyone kept asking, "How do you do this?"

And we answered, "Not by our own strength, but by the strength the Lord has given us."

Were the aid efforts sufficient? When you evaluate the first three months, what was done by the churches?

In the first three months, we can say that the aid was sufficient, but it was not regular or well organized. As a result, some people received a lot, while others received almost nothing. The churches rushed to provide help immediately, and most groups were well intentioned, but unfortunately they lacked experience. The churches

provided a great deal of assistance in the form of food, drinks, and clothing.

Was trauma counseling sufficient? At the same time, was trauma counseling carried out properly?

There was trauma counseling, but I think it was neither sufficient nor conducted correctly.

“Did you or your family receive trauma counseling?”

“Yes, we did—three months after the earthquake.”

Nearly three years have passed. When you evaluate the entire earthquake region, what is the current situation? Could you list the greatest needs?

When the entire earthquake region is considered, almost everywhere has recovered except Hatay. Although the center of the earthquake was said to be Maraş, the areas most affected were Antakya and İskenderun. People here are still living in containers because the earthquake housing has not yet been completed. Tradespeople are in a difficult situation because business is slow and rents have increased dramatically since the earthquake. Since there are very few sound buildings, housing rents have risen sharply.

Therefore, the greatest need is shelter. However, in my opinion, these people have even greater psychological needs. Almost

everyone—including the church—has focused mainly on material aid, but no one has really listened to these people or addressed their emotional and spiritual needs. Even the slightest tremor still causes great panic among the population. Many people are still using antidepressants because of the earthquake. In my view, these people need comfort and emotional and spiritual support. We have been doing this for almost three years now, or at least trying to do so.

At the end of three years after February 6, 2023, following 04:17, what can be done looking ahead?

In my opinion, stricter supervision of construction projects can be implemented. Training related to earthquakes—especially search and rescue—can be provided, and the public can be made more aware. As for us, we try to guide people not toward what is temporary, but toward what is lasting. Because, as we saw and experienced in the earthquake, no matter how strong you are in worldly terms, it makes no difference—everything can disappear within two minutes.

We sincerely thank Cem and Günay Konur for their heartfelt contributions. 07.01.2026



THE STORY OF A PHOTOGRAPH

On the 8th or 9th day after the earthquake, as hopes began to fade, the number of people coming to the morgue also decreased. A representative of a construction contractor who had arrived in Besni was speaking excitedly on the phone: “Send as many construction machines as you have... send as many workers as possible, skilled or unskilled...”

Before long, the number of heavy machines began to increase. They waited ready until the next permit arrived. Separating those who had died beneath the completely destroyed buildings was sometimes—perhaps most of the time—not possible (about six

months later, when I went to Hatay, there was a heavy smell of decaying human bodies in the air).

The elderly man in the photograph gives the impression that he is carrying the weight of his body with great difficulty. Distracted, he was probably unaware of the excavator standing in front of him as he passed by, as if it were standing at attention.

CONCLUSION

The February 6, 2023 Maraş–Elbistan earthquakes confronted people living both in Turkey and abroad with the reality of the disaster and its aftermath. Although there were situations described as moments when humanity seemed to have died—such as indifference, theft, and viewing the disaster as an opportunity for material gain—those who made sincere efforts to provide all the help they could deserve to be appreciated.

The support of volunteers is invaluable; however, as time goes on, they themselves become worn out and may even develop a need for psychological support. For this reason, emergency search and rescue operations, as well as the subsequent provision of basic needs for survivors and earthquake victims, should be the responsibility of professional teams. In Türkiye, where earthquake storms have been experienced over the past year, it is essential for the state and non-governmental organizations to keep a nationwide mobilization for volunteer first aid training on the agenda.

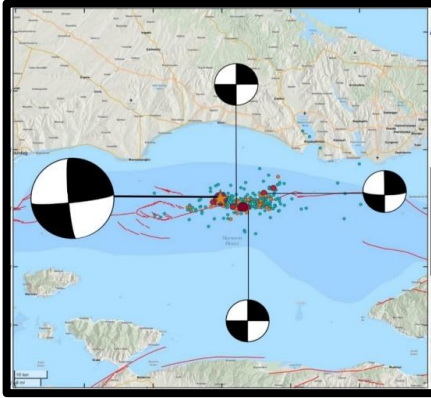
After an earthquake, priorities change in the economic choices of the state, civil society organizations, and individuals alike. Aid gradually decreases, and earthquake survivors are left on their own

with their pain and trauma. Yet for survivors to be able to hold on to life, basic physical needs such as shelter and economic security must be resolved, and trauma counseling must be provided free of charge and on a continuous basis—regardless of the cost—so that our humanity does not die as well. Let a helping hand continue to be extended to our brothers and sisters who are in distress.

APPENDIX:

Reflections on the 23 April 2025 Istanbul Earthquake

The earthquake that occurred in the Marmara Sea off the coast of Silivri at 12:49 on April 23, 2025 caught everyone under different circumstances and at an unexpected moment.¹⁸ Although there was



no loss of life, the fear caused by the earthquake was too great to be underestimated. Türkiye was glued to phones and news broadcasts. Many people were trying to get in touch with their loved ones to understand their situation.

From the time of the first earthquake in Istanbul until 11:05 the following day, 272 aftershocks were recorded, with magnitudes ranging between 1.6 and 5.9.¹⁹

On the day of the earthquake, my daughter was in Istanbul, and I was trying to understand her situation. On the one hand, everything

¹⁸ Photograph: <https://deprem.afad.gov.tr/assets/pdf/marmara-denizi-depremi.pdf> (06.01.2025)

¹⁹ Photograph: <https://deprem.afad.gov.tr/assets/pdf/marmara-denizi-depremi.pdf> (06.01.2025)

seemed normal; on the other hand, we were anxious, feeling that nothing would truly remain normal. It was possible to pick her up and bring her to Bursa, which we considered safer in terms of earthquakes, or she could continue with her daily life. She herself had no clear idea whether to stay in Istanbul or come to Bursa. Her roommates had left the dormitory.

In the end, late at night, I went to Istanbul and Pınar and I returned to Bursa. Now, when I think about it, I'm glad we did. Aftershocks were continuing, and at that time it was completely unclear what consequences they might have. This anxiety-provoking situation was deeply unsettling.

The earthquake was felt strongly not only in Istanbul but across the Marmara Region and in nearby provinces. One of the first



questions that came to mind was, “Was this the long-anticipated Istanbul earthquake?”

The same question continues to be asked. Some say, “A rupture has occurred along the fault line, so there will not be a larger earthquake in the near future,” while others argue the opposite, saying, “Sooner or later, an earthquake of magnitude 7–7.5 should be expected, and preparedness is necessary.”

“Although it is not possible to give a definitive answer to the question ‘Will there be a larger earthquake in Istanbul?’, prevailing opinions suggest that a major earthquake is likely to occur.”

If an earthquake stronger than magnitude 7 were to occur in the Sea of Marmara, it appears that Istanbul, Kocaeli, Bursa, Tekirdağ, Sakarya, Balıkesir, Çanakkale, Bilecik, Yalova, and Edirne would be among the areas primarily affected.

The absence of loss of life in the April 23, 2025 earthquake is a source of consolation. If a larger earthquake were to occur in the future, can we maintain this hope? We do not know.

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