



Clipping dari Internet IV

Berbagai refleksi - Bahasa Inggris

Tsunami Weblog: The World Seeks Meaning

Is God to blame for the tragedy? Plus: the recent tsunami updates, ministry amid the wreckage, and Christians give \$millions in relief.

Compiled by Rob Moll and Ted Olsen | posted 01/05/2005 4:30 p.m.

[Christianity Today, Week of January 3](#)

Included in a mass burial in India, 8-year-old Anthony Praveen shocked hospital workers when he suddenly sat up and opened his eyes. Though saved from the tsunami when it hit the town of Vailankanni, India, and saved again from premature burial, Praveen's story is not seen as a glimmer of hope amid the tragedy. According to [The Washington Times](#), "His father, a daily-wage laborer from Madras, had taken his wife and two children on a pilgrimage to the Roman Catholic Church of [Our Lady of Health](#) in Vailankanni, a shrine famed for its healing powers, [Praveen's] grandmother explained." The only other survivor in the family, she said the family made an offering at the church, went to the sea to bathe, and were swept away by the tsunami.

"They went to offer their hair to [Mother] Vailankanni," said the grandmother. "In return, they lost their lives to the sea. I don't know why [Mother] gave this rude blow to us. How can I take care of this boy and his education now?"

Did God cause the tsunami?

Supernatural causation and divine culpability are the hottest debates coming out of the Indian Ocean devastation. Man-made destruction seems easier to understand and explain than indiscriminate natural havoc. That's why there is so much more discussion of theodicy in newspapers around the globe than after 9/11. We don't blame Abel's death on God; we blame it on Cain. But it's much easier for people, like Job's friends, to blame the death of Job's family on someone.

One commentator says it's God's fault, not that he exists. "God, if there is a God, should be ashamed of himself. The sheer enormity of the Asian tsunami disaster, the death, destruction, and havoc it has wreaked, the scale of the misery it has caused, must surely test the faith of even the firmest believer," says Allan Laing, in [The Glasgow Herald](#) in Scotland says, "I hope I'm right that there is no God. For, if there were, then he'd have to shoulder the blame. In my book, he would be as guilty as sin and I'd want nothing to do with him. A death toll of 140,000 (and still rising) is one helluva price to pay to let the rest of us feel his presence and allow humankind to indulge in a redemptive exercise of mass compassion."

Kenneth Nguyen, writing in [The Age](#) of Melbourne, Australia agrees. "Responsibility for the tsunami must be sheeted home to God ¡ the tsunami has highlighted just how unpalatable the idea of an interventionist God ultimately is."

If believing in a God that *allows* tragedy is difficult, Nguyen will have more difficulty understanding a God the uses tsunamis to punish. Some in India are [blaming the tragedy](#) on Christians and the recent arrest of a Hindu leader. "In India¡a country often seen as a spiritual battleground,

where religions fight over the souls of the poor and dispossessed¡some conservative Hindus have used the tsunami to criticize both a Hindu leader's arrest and the presence of Christian missionaries in India. Meanwhile," reports Beliefnet, "evangelical Christian groups may proselytize as they help tsunami victims."

But most Westerners have quit believing in a God that causes or prevents natural disasters. "To profess that sort of belief is to betray oneself as a captive to a fundamentalist mind-set that has elevated faith above reason in apprehending natural phenomena," says Scot Lehig of [The Boston Globe](#).

Michael Novak, on the [National Review Online](#), says that those who blame or get angry with God are angry with a God they profess not to believe in. Those who ask, "How could God let this happen?" are not seeking an answer. Rather, it is an attempt "to prove that he has been smarter all along, and to watch me have to surrender as he has surrendered."

"They do not blame just any God," says Novak. "They blame the God of Christianity, for in Christ the world has been given an even more vivid image of divine concern for the poor, the lowly, and the needy, and of divine gentleness, friendship, and love. ¡ The question is not, 'Does God measure up to our (liberal, compassionate, self-deceived) standards?' The question is, 'Will we learn ¡ how great, on a far different scale from ours, is God's love?'"

No more sentimental view of nature

Novak also critiques abstract notions of a God of benign goodness. "Most of the public voices in our enlightened age have gotten away with the indefensible drivel of liberal sentimentalism, chattering as if all intelligent people are atheists, whose god is a benevolent, nurturing, sheltering Mother Nature."

David Brooks [also says](#) Mother Nature can no longer be viewed as the New England Transcendentalists once did. "The naturalists hold up nature as the spiritual tonic to our vulgar modern world. They urge us to break down the barriers that alienate us from nature. Live simply and imbibe nature's wisdom. ¡ Nature doesn't seem much like a nurse or friend this week, and when Thoreau goes on to celebrate the savage wildness of nature, he sounds, this week, like a boy who has seen a war movie and thinks he has experienced the glory of combat," Brooks says.

Brooks also complains of how quickly we must turn tragedy into hope. "The world's generosity has indeed been amazing, but sometimes we use our compassion as a self-enveloping fog to obscure our view of the abyss. Somehow it's wrong to turn this event into a good-news story so we can all feel warm this holiday season. It's wrong to turn it into a story about us, who gave, rather than about them, whose lives were ruined. It's certainly wrong to turn this into yet another petty political spat, as many tried, disgustingly, to do."

Deceiving ourselves:

"Only a churl would deny anyone the consolation of hope,"



writes Philip Kennicott in [The Washington Post](#). "But this frantic drive to find heartwarming alternatives to the death and destruction seems more a symptom of the American psyche than a 'fact on the ground' in the tsunami zone. We impose hope because it allows us to contain a horrific story."

Kennicott decries the "celebrity" journalists who find survivors or areas the waves missed in order to allow viewers to feel better. Each story has a religious arc: Tragedy leads to salvation. "Disaster also forces the skeptical mind to question God's existence, and yet the media—supposedly so skeptical—do a virtuoso dance around the problem of God and his mercy."

In Europe, also, commentators wonder if the culture is no longer able to debate God's role in the tragedy. "Earthquakes do not merely kill and destroy," writes Martin Kettle in [The Guardian](#). "They challenge human beings to explain the world order in which such apparently indiscriminate acts can occur. Europe in the 18th century had the intellectual curiosity and independence to ask and answer such questions. But can we say the same of 21st-century Europe? Or are we too cowed now to even ask if the God can exist that can do such things?"

The problem isn't a matter of belief versus nonbelief, says [The Telegraph](#) in an editorial. "Like so many things in modern British life, agnosticism is not a function of deliberation and reasoning, but of apathy and indifference." But if the tsunami does make you want to blame God, [The Times](#) of London has a suggestion. "Try to imagine a world without these interventions by fate. Would you prefer it?"

Besides, can we blame God for the deaths caused by the tsunami, when humans do far more damage by themselves? "For all its horror, the suffering caused by natural disasters is not comparable to the suffering that human beings inflict on one another," writes Paul Stenhouse in [The Australian](#).

Rabbi Michael Lerner [offers evidence](#). "Two weeks ago the United Nations issued a report detailing the deaths of more than 29,000 children every single day as a result of avoidable diseases and malnutrition. Over 10 million children a year! The difference between the almost nonexistent coverage of this ongoing human-created disaster and the huge focus on the terrible tsunami-generated suffering in South East Asia reveals some deep and ugly truths about our collective self-deceptions. Imagine if every single day there were headlines in every newspaper in the world and every television show saying: '29,000 children died yesterday from preventable diseases and malnutrition.'"

Attempted Christian responses

Belief in God is not tied to our interpretation of natural events. "The extraordinary fact is that belief has survived such tests again and again," writes Archbishop of Canterbury [Rowan Williams](#) in a defense that notably lacks anything Christian. "Not because it comforts or explains but because believers cannot deny what has been shown or given to them—they have learned that there is some reality to which they can only relate in amazement and silence. These convictions are terribly assaulted by all those other facts of human experience that seem to point to a completely arbitrary world, but people still feel bound to them, not for comfort or ease, but because they have imposed themselves on the shape of a life and the habits of a heart."

The article has been criticized—by [the paper](#) that published it—but Williams seems to be saying that when

Job asked God to explain himself, God's only answer was to provoke that "amazement and silence."

But Williams does criticize arm-chair philosophers. "The odd thing is that those who are most deeply involved—both as sufferers and as helpers—are so often the ones who spend least energy in raging over the lack of explanation. They are most aware of two things: a kind of strength and vision just to go on; and a sense of the imperative for practical service and love. Somehow in all of this, God simply emerges for them as a faithful presence."

After all, says Edward Spence in [The Sydney Morning Herald](#), "Perhaps this is the essence, if the legend is true, of what God learnt from us when he walked and suffered as a man among us. Ultimately, the problem of evil confronts us not as a puzzle to be solved but as a mystery to be experienced."

Donna Schaper, pastor of the North Hadley Church in Massachusetts, [also says](#) to embrace the mystery. "We put reality in too small a box. If there is a gift in this unexplainable horror, it will be in a renewed respect for mystery, a new respect for the untameable sea and the land. This disaster may bring us back toward life by helping us enjoy the gifts we have in a way we might not have been able to do before the great sea."

Bishop of Durham Tom Wright [instead looks](#) to Jesus. Western culture hasn't gotten past the standoff that occurred after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, when tens of thousands died. "Lisbon drove a wedge between God and the world, giving fresh impetus to the idea of God as an absentee landlord and then, not long after, a mere absentee. Since then, it has been assumed that 'God' has a responsibility to stop things like earthquakes and tidal waves; if he doesn't, they constitute a standing disproof. What's the point in saying 'The heavens declare the glory of God,' if tidal waves declare his incompetence?"

But the Bible's absence from the discussion of the meaning of the tsunami is a great loss, Wright says. "It tells a story about the Creator's plan to put the world to rights, a plan which involves a people who are themselves part of the problem as well as the bearers of the solution. It tells a story about Jesus' own sense of abandonment, and thereby encourages us to embrace the same sense of helpless involvement in the sorrow of the world, as the means by which the world is to be healed. Those who work for justice, reconciliation, and peace will know that sense, and perhaps, occasionally, that healing."

A suffering savior

[Al Mohler](#), president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says Christians ought to respond as the Bible does. "A faithful Christian response will affirm the true character and power of God—his omnipotence and his benevolence. God is in control of the entire universe, and there is not even a single atom outside his sovereignty. And God's goodness and love are beyond question. The Bible leaves no room for equivocation on either truth. We must speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Scripture is silent. Christians must avoid offering explanations when God has not revealed an explanation."

Barney Zwartz, religion editor at [The Age](#), agrees that seeking to figure out a God beyond our comprehension is outside of philosophical understanding.

Theodicy discusses suffering as a theoretical abstraction to be justified by logical inference from an abstract philosophical deity who is reduced to a set of attributes: perfect goodness, perfect knowledge, perfect power. This philosopher's god is a metaphysical creation of the



Enlightenment for purposes of argument – the person and teaching of Jesus, for example, does not enter the discussion.

But, as Christian philosopher Stanley Hauerwas shows, for the early Christians, suffering was not a metaphysical problem needing a solution but a practical challenge needing a response of faith. Apparently it never occurred to them to question their belief in God or his goodness because they were unjustly suffering. Rather, their faith gave them direction in the face of persecution and general misfortune.

Zwartz says that when Jesus was "asked for a theological account of suffering, Jesus instead highlights the urgency of the gospel call of the Kingdom of God: repent (change course) and believe."

Becoming human

Sermon on Genesis 1:26-31 - March 12, 2005

Aart van Beek

Dear friends,

I was asked to do a meditation, not a sermon, about the tsunami. I was asked to do it in English, but I may intersperse my reflection with a few Indonesian words here and there, because most of you here are Indonesians. For those of you who have trouble with English, I will try to speak slowly. The tsunami story woke us up of December 26. It was so enormous in its scope that it inundated us with questions and horror and more questions. The wave seemed to be getting bigger in the following days or weeks. The wave of bad news reminded us of the tsunami itself and we asked "How far is this going to go and when is this going to stop?" If we thought that, what did the victims who lost so many of their loved ones as well as their possessions think? How must those feel that have become like Job, wondering what they did to deserve this? They have been covered by a wave of grief, of dukacita, as their loved ones were covered by the sea and we are reminded of the words of Jonah after he was thrown into the sea, Jonah 2, verse three: "For thou has cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the current engulfed me, all thy breakers and billows passed over me."

We also think of the ancient story of Noah and his ark on the floodwaters of what many consider to be the Black sea. So here we are, almost three months later and we are wondering, why are we here talking about this again? But maybe it is a good time to do this, because there is some distance between us and the event, some distance between us and the wave. Rescuers have come and gone and now there are the years and healing and rebuilding that must take place.

The tsunami brought us back to the most basic of questions, to the power of the earth that is always changing, full of restlessness, always in motion, speeding through space in circles while we hang on for dear life. An event of these proportions will be talked about for centuries, will never be forgotten. In fifty years survivors will show remnants of the wave's destruction: makeshift grave stones, pieces of debris, damage to walls, to remind them when the flood came, almost without sound, without rain on a clear morning, unexpected. The tsunami takes us back to the beginning of time when all things were created.

The earth was created first and then we human beings came into being. We can argue about whether that happened in several days or several billion years. What is important that the conditions of what occurred on the Indian ocean floor right after Christmas day in 2004 had been set into motion before or long before there were human beings on this earth. So how can we make any judgments about it?

What has happened instead, friends, is that people from many religions have been affected by this disaster: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, even Jew, Christian, Atheist. And all our religions were left speechless at first. Then everybody started talking, in mosques, temples and churches, on television, trying to explain why this happened. Let's be frank, a lot of people said a lot of dumb things! You see, everybody expected an answer, forcing the religious experts to start talking, but they didn't know what they were talking about. No one knew what they were talking about. After an event of such force and power, the only thing we can do really is be still, be speechless. That was a bad thing: every religion had an explanation. Hindus thought the God of destruction had spoken, Muslims thought the mosques left standing were sign that Islam would rise higher, many Christians thought that the destruction meant God was punishing non-Christians. I don't know if you know this but when Krakatoa erupted in the 1880's, many people of Aceh saw it as a sign that it was time to rebel against the Dutch colonizers. That they wanted to rebel against their colonizers is understandable, but interestingly it was a similar argument as was made in the aftermath of the tsunami. In traditional Javanese culture when there are natural disasters, like volcanic eruptions, the Sultans believed that their time as rulers of the Kraton was almost over. I think enough time has passed that we are wise enough to know perhaps that we don't know anything. Friends, our world is full of preachers who think they know everything, know-it-alls. Indonesians call them "sok-tahu" people. but to really be wise means to admit what we know how little we know. Sometimes when I cannot sleep I watch the late night evangelists on television and hear them make all kinds of statements about the end of the world based on one or two verses in the Bible and I wonder, do they even know the original meaning of the text in Hebrew or Greek? I'm not saying they are wrong, but must we assume they are automatically right? They don't necessarily agree with each other either. The point is that whatever religion we have, there will always be an explanation, always a preacher we believe has the answer. "Wah, orang itu top, hebaaat!" I am saying, believe in God, but question your preachers, whoever they are. Your preachers are only as smart as their teachers. And I am saying that as a preacher and as one who has taught preachers.

Friends, we are all very attached to our faith and to our church. I know most of you are very happy in your own church, in your own faith. It is very hard to imagine our lives without our own faith, without our church. It is so dear to our hearts. But I believe the creation story about human beings in Genesis teaches us something very old and something very basic: that we are human beings before we are anything else. The world was created before we human beings were. But much in the creation story in the book of Genesis is devoted to the creation of human beings. In chapter one, verse 26 we read: "Let us make the human being in our own image." In verse 27 it says: "And God created the human being in God's own image, in the image of God He created them, male and female he created them." Verse 28: "And God blessed them, "Be fruitful and



multiply and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that rules over the earth."

Friends, God made the human being in God's own image. What an honor! What an honor to have a little bit of God in us. You know the people of Bali believe that babies should not touch the ground with their feet until months after they are born, because they are considered to have God in them when they are born. That is such a beautiful thought. Maybe this kind of thinking is one of the reasons that Indonesian people love children so much; they are always so nice to little children.

If we are made in God's image, we have a little bit of God in us. It is hard to describe what it is, maybe it isn't that much, but when we see the overwhelming response to the tsunami, yes we can see, that is how God would want us to act. People have a talent for receiving God's spirit when we want to. Perhaps that is where we get something from God: we are able, although some more easily than others, to connect with God's Holy Spirit.

Friends, before there were people, there was the earth. In the same way, before there was Christian faith or Muslim faith or Jewish faith or Hindu or Buddhist faith, there were people. The text does not say: God created Presbyterians in God's own image, God created Roman Catholics in God's own image, God created Pentecostals in God's own image, God created Muslims or Jews in God's own image or Hindus or Buddhists. No, the text says: "God created human beings in God's own image, Gambar Allah. What this means is that before we were Christians or Muslims or Buddhist or Hindus or Jews, we were human beings. Before anything we were human beings. This seems very obvious to us of course, but we don't live like it is obvious. If the tsunami taught us anything it is that we are one in our humanity. Even though religion divides us we are one in our humanity. The flier for the tsunami service today shows that unity. That terrible wave, that ombak, united us somehow. The wave was big enough to wipe away our differences for a little while.

This is our challenge to rediscover our common humanity. Interestingly, I believe it was Condoleezza Rice, the current U.S. secretary of state who said that "Racism is America's birth defect." Wherever you go in this country, we are always aware of race. Unless someone is white, you'll hear: the suspect or the victim is an Asian, Hispanic, Black etc. But honestly, should we really care what color we are? Americans care, and even if they don't care they notice. If Racism is America's birth defect, then maybe religious tension is Indonesia's birth defect. You talk to people and they'll ask you what religion they are: "dia orang apa, orang Islam, orang Katolik, Karismatik atau nggak. Orang Kristen, Kristen apa, ooh gereja ituuu. Oh, I see."

Genesis tells us we are human beings made in the image of God, Gambar Allah, before we are anything else. This is we must rediscover. Because we cannot be Christians and not be human beings, we cannot be Muslims and not be human beings etc. But sometimes, friends, sometimes Christians do not behave like human beings and sometimes Muslims don't behave like human beings and sometimes Jews don't behave like human beings, sometimes Buddhist don't behave like human beings, sometimes Hindus don't behave like human beings. This is not acceptable. This is our challenge. If we are going to be true to our faith, we must be human first. This is true of us but also of our governments, our armies, our presidents. We should be

adamant and say: "don't drop bombs on people, don't attack people randomly, don't imprison people without trial, don't kill people without reason and tell me you are a Christian or a Muslim or Hindu or a Buddhist or a Jew. I don't care. Don't tell me what your faith is first, jangan dulu, show be you behave like a human being first, a human being made in the image of the Holy One. Before you show me how you worship, show me your humanity. Then let's talk and agree to disagree. This is the lesson of the tsunami of 2004, friends. So before we listen to those who pretend they know exactly that this is God's punishment for certain people, let us remember who we are: humans made in the image of God: man, woman, child. To be truly human is to say: aku adalah kau, kau adalah aku: I am you and you are me and we all belong to God.

Amen.

Message delivered for a fundraising service dedicated to post-tsunami rebuilding in Indonesia. The audience included members of Adventist, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic and other Christian Indonesian churches as well as staff from the Indonesian Consulate (some Muslims) in San Francisco and friends from non-Indonesian churches.

God and the Tsunami: Theology in the Headlines

Albert Mohler

President, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2005

www.crosswalk.com; www.christianpost.com

The scale of suffering and the magnitude of the disaster in Southeast Asia defy the imagination. Sitting comfortably in our own homes and offices, we can look at the images, video segments, and computer simulations, knowing all the while that, in the nations that encircle the Indian Ocean, the death toll continues to mount.

This much is clear - the direct death toll from this disaster is likely to reach 250,000, and subsequent deaths related to the disaster may drive the total number of deaths to well over half a million. Those numbers are hard to take, but the video images are even harder to see. Satellite pictures taken before and after the massive tsunamis struck unprotected coastlines tell the story.

Before the tsunami, a thriving region is clearly visible. In the aftermath, entire towns, villages, and cities have been wiped off the map. A wall of water traveling several hundred miles an hour and reaching the height of a multi-story building slammed into Thailand, India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka with devastating force. At least nine nations were affected, with some of the waves bringing destruction as far away as Somalia on Africa's eastern coast.

The magnitude of this disaster is multiplied when we realize that these very areas most devastated by the tsunamis are among the most impoverished and helpless regions of the earth. On December 26, families were washed away, children were ripped from their parents' arms, and suffering beyond description settled upon the earth. Why?

The Big Question

That question comes immediately to the mind of any sensitive person, and any individual whose mind is allowed



to rest for even a moment upon the magnitude of this disaster. At the first level, the scientific explanation seems clear. A massive earthquake, registering over 9.0 on the Richter scale, occurred more than six miles beneath the surface of the Pacific, just off the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

In an instant, one of the most beautiful parts of the world became one of the most deadly, as successive mountains of water radiated from the epicenter of the quake and headed for some of the earth's most densely populated coastal areas. The sliding of tectonic plates beneath the surface of the ocean led to massive devastation and a tidal wave of grief and questions.

How do Christians explain this kind of suffering? What do we have to say about the meaning of an event like this? In short order, questions like these found their way to the front pages of the newspapers and the front lines of our cultural conversation. All too soon, confusion was evident, as various religious leaders offered advice and counsel.

Writing in *The Guardian*, reporter Martin Kettle put the problem in clear form: "Earthquakes and the belief in the judgment of God are, indeed, very hard to reconcile. However, no religion that offers an explanation of the world can avoid making some kind of an attempt to fit the two together." As Kettle asserted, "As with previous earthquakes, any explanation of this latest one poses us a sharp intellectual choice. Either there is an entirely natural explanation for it, or there is some other kind. Even the natural one is by no means easy to imagine, but it is at least wholly coherent."

For the atheist or agnostic, the natural explanation will suffice. Those who hold to a naturalistic and materialistic worldview will simply see this disaster as one more meaningless event taking place in a meaningless universe. As British philosopher Bryan Appleyard concluded, "The simple truth is what it has always been: nature, uncontrolled, unbidden, unpredictable, can still humble our pride and wreck our schemes in an instant. We are a thin film of thought confined to a narrow band around an undistinguished planet orbiting a pretty average star." In other words, this is just one more accident taking place in an accidental world, observed by accidental human creatures.

A Challenge

The challenge to the Christian faith is clear, even as it is often crudely put forth by secular critics. If God is both omnipotent and benevolent, how can disasters like this happen? This question was stated concisely by playwright Archibald MacLeish in his Pulitzer-prize winning play, *J.B.* Through his character Nickles, MacLeish poses the theological challenge: "If God is God, He is not good; if God is good, He is not God."

An example of how *not* to give a Christian answer was provided by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Writing in *The Sunday Telegraph*, Williams said this: "Every single random, accidental death is something that should upset a faith bound up with comfort and ready answers. Faced with the paralyzing magnitude of a disaster like this, we naturally feel more deeply outraged - and also more deeply helpless. We can't see how this is going to be dealt with, we can't see how to make it better. We know, with a rather sick feeling, that we shall have to go on facing it and we can't make it go away or make ourselves feel good."

The newspaper headlined the archbishop's column, "Of Course This Makes Us Doubt God's Existence." After the article was published, the archbishop protested the

headline, and his spokesman claimed that the paper's characterization of the archbishop's article was "a misrepresentation of the archbishop's views."

In response, the paper acknowledged that while it may have misrepresented the archbishop's argument, nevertheless, "he himself must accept much of the blame." Surely speaking for the paper's readers as well as its editors, the paper observed, "His prose is so obscure, his thought processes so hard to follow, that his message is often unclear." In exasperation, the paper simply concluded, "If Dr. Williams hopes to teach and inspire his flock, he really must learn to express himself more clearly. Otherwise he will be forever doomed to be the victim of his own erudition."

In Australia, much closer to the tragedy, the Anglican Dean of Sydney, Phillip Jensen, explained that natural disasters are a part of God's warning that judgment is coming. Jensen was right of course, as Jesus Himself pointed to natural disasters as a warning to human beings of our own mortality and of the coming judgment of God. Nevertheless, this was too much for more liberal churchmen in Australia. Neil Brown, Dean of Saint Mary's Cathedral [Catholic] described Jensen's comments as "a rather horrible belief when you begin to think about it."

Well, that's orthodox Christian theology, when you think about it. Jesus clearly warned His disciples that famines and earthquakes, along with wars and other ominous phenomena, would be the "birth pangs" of coming tribulation and judgment [Matthew 24: 7-8].

This is no time for theological hand-wringing and evasion. A great tragedy like this is often the catalyst for bad theology offered as soothing counsel from religious professionals.

A faithful Christian response will affirm the true character and power of God--His omnipotence and His benevolence. God is in control of the entire universe, and there is not even a single atom outside His sovereignty. And God's goodness and love are beyond question. The Bible leaves no room for equivocation on either truth.

We must speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Scripture is silent. Christians must avoid offering explanations when God has not revealed an explanation. Finally, Christians must respond to a crisis like this by weeping with those who weep, by praying with fervent faithfulness, by offering concrete assistance in Christ's name and, most importantly, by bearing bold witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ - the only way to bring life out of death.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. is president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. For more articles and resources by Dr. Mohler, and for information on The Albert Mohler Program, a daily national radio program broadcast on the Salem Radio Network, go to www.albertmohler.com. For information on The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, go to www.sbts.edu. Send feedback to mail@albertmohler.com.

IN CHRIST SUFFERING IS FACED BUT NOT EFFACED

by Simon Barrow

www.simonbarrow.net



Once they told Rabbi Pinhas of the great misery among the needy. He listened, sunk in grief. Then he raised his head. "Let us draw God into the world," he cried, "and all need will be quenched." God's grace consists precisely in this, that God wants to... be won by humanity, placing [Godself], so to speak, into human hands. God wants to come to the world, but to come to it through men and women. This is the mystery of our existence, the supra-human chance of humankind. (Martin Buber)

Writing from the depths of Judaism, Buber and Pinhas serve to remind us Christians of the biblical truth that the One who we meet in Christ is not a God whose incarnation begins and ends with the history of Jesus. It is, extraordinarily, an eternal condition of the divine to be given within the limits of our humanity.

This is actually what traditional Christian language seeks to convey by picturing for us the 'pre-existence' of the logos, and by proclaiming that the one who was crucified is now risen, uniting the life we meet in the fleshly Word with the hidden and un-containable life of God. This, experienced through forgiveness and restoration, is what Christian hope is all about.

Rendered as metaphysical propositions such formulations are likely to cause us moderns no end of problems. Received as nameless encounter beyond theorising, however, they evoke that redeeming God-with-usness which returns our questioning gaze with the face of Jesus, right down to his refining, definitive anonymity in our midst (see Matthew 25).

Picking up on these experiences in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, theologian Ruth Page has suggested that 'pansyntheism' (God-with-all) may be a better way of expositing 'the incarnation of freedom and love' than either seventeenth century theism or process panentheism. The former can seem too abstract and aloof; the latter can blur the incommensurability of God and the universe in the process of seeking their ultimate congruence.

Meanwhile, what sticks out like a bloodied thumb in Pinhas's passionate prose is his apparent suggestion that the need created by suffering within our present horizon can somehow be quenched by the invocation of God within this world.

That may be the experience of some people, but as a generalised prescription it is too easy, too definitive. Like Christian attempts to mortgage disaster and disease to sin and judgement (a move Jesus explicitly rejected), it evades the obscenity and horror of actual death and torture.

For we should surely never forget that in the New Testament the risen Christ is deliberately imaged with the wounds of crucifixion still visibly impressed upon him. They are transformed, yes. But not obliterated. Not even by the resurrection of the dead.

In a universe where love's as-yet-unfinished possibility entails the sometimes deadly freedom of contingency, suffering cannot be effaced. Even so, those who suffer can themselves be 'faced', given worth, dignity and hope within the community of the living-alongside.

Moreover, the vision that God will in the final reckoning be all-in-all is, simultaneously, the promise that 'one day we shall have faces'. We will count in our own right, but also in

utter loving dependence on one another and upon God. That is what 'the risen life' involves.

But right now, in a world still entrapped and enthralled by the power of death, "only a suffering God will do", as Dietrich Bonhoeffer poignantly put it. Not a God who denies, douses, justifies, inflicts or disowns suffering, but a God who embraces it (and its victims) through an unconquerable love that is beyond our control but not beyond either our imagination or our active compassion.

It is this God who comes close to us when we are so pressed that we simply do not know how to begin pray. As St Paul puts it, on such occasions the Spirit holds for us the very words we cannot find. And they tell us not that we can avoid suffering, but that with and beyond it there is the God who is our beginning, our sustenance and our end.

(c) Simon Barrow, 2005 *This is an reflection derived from a piece that originally appeared on the [FaithInSociety](#) weblog. See also [Is God a Disaster Area?](#) and the [Tsunami Prayer](#) page.*

Tsunami Prayer & Reflection

www.simonbarrow.net

As far as limits are concerned, I think it best simply to remain silent and to leave the unresolvable unresolved. The belief in resurrection is not the 'solution' to the problem of death. The 'beyond' of God is not the 'beyond' of our cognitive capacity. Epistemological transcendence has nothing to do with God's transcendence. God is 'beyond' [in] our lives. The church is found not where human capacity fails, at the limits, but rather in the middle of the village.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Tegel Prison, 30 April 1944)

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age by age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

(from Natural Resources by Adrienne Rich)

[01 Jan 05] As the scale of the Asian tsunami disaster becomes ever more apparent -- the United Nations is now describing it as one of the world's worst-ever natural humanitarian disasters in modern times -- people across the world are turning to prayer. (1)

For many in the secularised West this may be a puzzling reaction. The immediate aftermath of the earthquakes and tidal waves spreading out from Indonesia and the Indian Ocean on 26 December 2004 saw an outbreak of questioning in Europe: 'What kind of God could allow this?' It may not be the right way of putting the question, since it assumes a 'god' who is but a projection of ourselves writ large (as Bonhoeffer indicates), but the depth of the religious dilemma raised by such disaster cannot and should not be avoided.

However thought (and theological thought) is not the first, instinctive response. The first response is a cry of anguish, helplessness, despair and puzzlement mingled with hope, determination and willingness to do something (no matter how small) to respond. This is the response of giving, longing and desiring alongside those who are bereft, bereaving and destitute. It is prayer.



Often our prayers are incoherent, cliched even. It does not matter. In touching the heart of God (whether we intend that, or not) we are allowing our own hearts to be touched and melted. What was stone can become flesh in the face of the one we meet in Jesus, as Archbishop Rowan Williams has put it.

Such prayer is instant and agonising, planned and spontaneous, confessional and inter-confessional, faithful and doubting, knowing and unknowing.

On the morning of 1 January 2005 I did a web-search on 'tsunami' + 'prayer'. There were 902 [news items](#) (far more, as you read this) and 180,000 regular [web items](#). Again this will have mushroomed by now. And it is happening in a matter of days.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (the official ecumenical body) is providing [Tsunami prayers](#) and information on the [response of the national denominations](#) in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales -- together with news of churches action domestically and internationally. There is also a [suggested liturgy](#), news from [Sri Lanka](#), and a [tsunami update](#) page.

In the US [Liturgies, reflection, hymns, prayers and texts](#) are being made available by the United Methodist Church.

[Church World Service](#), the international development arm of the [National Council of Churches of Christ USA](#), has put up a Tsunami hymn, which is available for one-off congregational use in association with ecumenical fundraising efforts. It can be found [here, with music](#). The story of the venture is here: '[Christians unite in tsunami hymn and prayer](#)'. It's not the greatest lyrical creation, but it is heart-felt.

Here is prayer service material from [Catholic Relief Services](#) (*PDF), from [CAFOD](#), from [Christian Aid](#) (for youth), from various [Anglican](#) sources, and from the [Salvation Army](#). This [powerpoint presentation](#) is from the Evangelical Alliance in the Netherlands. Another prayer from [Redcliffe](#) college.

There are general [prayers for use in bereavement](#) available on this site, too.

A virtual [prayer room, a 'quiet space'](#), has been established on an ecumenical site in the US. It is there so that we can pray alongside the victims. See also the [Upper Room](#). This is from the [Ascension Sanctuary](#).

The Canadian Primate Primates's World Relief and Development Fund has a [tsunami update](#) on its site, plus some excellent resource materials,

"Even while we may feel your absence in our lament, we trust you to be the One who grieves with us and who is present in the touch of each of us, their brothers and sisters, who offer hands and hearts to rescue and to rebuild places and lives. May your healing love be felt through us as we remember and reach out to those in need."

For a moment in the New Year, silence, prayers and vigils accompanied (often muted) celebrations. Life and death are with us in a moment of transition. The Pope led [prayers](#) and a Mass for the tsunami victims.

This from the Archbishop of Canterbury:

"The big picture doesn't always help, if it takes our eyes off local, individual stories. Someone said about the slaughter of the Jews in the death camps, 'It isn't six million dead - it's one person dead, times six million'. You could be overwhelmed by that; you could feel there was no hope or faith possible. But our Christian faith talks about a God who isn't content with the big picture alone. In Jesus he comes alongside us as a human being, he shows that he is a God always involved with people one by one."

This from CMS:

Merciful God, who in your great love and goodness hears the prayers of all your people and is ever-present with those who walk in the shadow of death: we hold in our prayers all who suffer loss and devastation in the wake of the tsunami disaster.

Comfort those who mourn. Give hope to those whose hope has been taken away. Strengthen the will of people everywhere to generously give help and aid. Guide governments and agencies leading relief programmes.

For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for the life of the world. Amen

More CMS prayers, including to from Madagascar and Bangladesh, collected by John Carden, are available [here](#). Reports are going up on the [USPG](#) site, including one from the [National Christian Council of India](#) and another from [Thailand](#).

Prayer and worship resources are being created and curated by the [National Council of Churches in Australia](#), by the [Church of Scotland](#). See also [Beyond Our Tears](#).

The hope people experience is often vulnerable, traditional and honest:

[Malaysia Star]: Jan 2: KOTA KINABALU: Candle-lit boats were sent off at the popular Tanjung Aru beach here at the stroke of midnight in memory of those who perished in last Sunday's earthquake and tsunami.

[India News]: Porayar, Jan 1: A Special prayer for the departed souls in the Tsunami attack will mark the New Year in the Basillica at Velankanni, the battered pilgrim town in Nagai district.

According to Church sources, Thanjavur Bishop Dr Devdoss Ambrose who is coordinating relief works in the town, will conduct the special prayer.

For decades, Velankanni had remained a special destination for New Year celebrations for people of all religions. Lakhs (devotees) used to gather in this town on New Year's eve to have a glimpse of the Lady of Good Health.

This is the first time [that] this church [will] wear a deserted look on New Year. Only the priests [from] the Church and very few people are found in the town today.
PTI

[Asia News]: Thailand, 31 Dec: The local Bishop, Mgr Pratan Sridarunsil, said the death toll might surpass 2,000, whilst the known injured are 5573.

Leaders of the country's various religions celebrated liturgies and suffrage rites for the tsunami victims and prayed for the families affected by the tragedy. [Full story.](#)



[People of faith across the globe](#) are united in hopeful silence.

"In Malaysia, even though the major religion is Islam, religious leaders of all faiths have held a mass multi-faith memorial service on Friday to be united in prayer for victims of the Asian tsunamis.

Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society President Sarath Surendre said, "We want Malaysians from all walks of faith to participate in the memorial service. We want to show that people from different faiths can unite and pray for the tsunami victims."

Why God is to be found in the terror of the tsunami

By Charles Moore

(Filed: 08/01/2005) www.telegraph.co.uk

Tony Blair is not the only public figure criticised for having stayed on holiday at the time of the tsunami. I have heard the same accusation levelled at God. Recovering from His son's birthday party, it is suggested, He couldn't be bothered to help. If God loves us, it is asked, why did He let tens of thousands of innocent people die in this catastrophe?

One traditional answer, no longer popular in the West, is that humanity deserves it. When Jim Callaghan was home secretary, dealing with the sudden explosion of conflict in Ulster in the late 1960s, he had an argument with the young Protestant firebrand, Ian Paisley. "After all," said Callaghan, in a conciliatory tone, "we are all children of God." "No, we are not," replied the Reverend Doctor. "We are all children of wrath." A similar belief has been expressed by some Muslim clerics in regions affected by the disaster: the tsunami is God's judgment on our wickedness, they have claimed, the result of His justified anger. From earliest times, people detected divine fury in the weather. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Flood is caused by gods in a rage at the ever-increasing noise floating up to Heaven from all those gabby people on Earth.

This is not, naturally, a view that appeals to the Church of England. In the latest Sunday Telegraph, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams would not even contemplate the suggestion that there could be anything punitive about such death. And he was extremely reluctant to find excuses for his boss. He suggested that "making sense" of such disasters was almost insulting to those affected by them. Dr Williams's piece has been unfairly maligned: most of it seemed to me true and subtle, and I was particularly struck by his point that "those most deeply involved... are so often the ones who spend least energy in raging over the lack of explanation".

When you hear the victims, they or their families generally speak without rage. Rizal Shahputra, an Indonesian labourer rescued after eight days' floating in the ocean on a palm tree, said that his faith in Allah and his constant prayer had sustained him and taken his mind off his hunger. He could, with apparently greater logic, have railed against the Allah who got him into this trouble in the first place, but does anyone really believe that he would have been the better for that, or more likely to survive?

A friend of mine who almost drowned in the Maldives on Boxing Day speaks only of his good fortune, of the woman

who saved his life, of how well fellow tourists and hotel staff behaved. One of his party died, but this makes him feel humble, guilty and sad, not angry against his creator. He says he learnt to pray better.

The point has been well made that such huge, disruptive natural violence as that of the tsunami does not really alter the moral question about natural evil. For a loving God, there cannot, presumably, be an "acceptable level of violence", a cold calculation that it is all right for a few children to be blown off mountains or a few hundred peasants in Bangladesh to die in floods, but not for more than 150,000 to perish all at once, especially when many of them were on holiday.

It is true, too, that the human understanding of things, indeed the very condition of being human, depends absolutely upon contrast - what is food without hunger, good without evil, life without death? No one can satisfactorily imagine a world in which things really are perfect, the New-Labourish utopia conjured up in a Michael Frayn novel of "a people's world for a people's people".

But while it seems quite easy to refute those criticisms of God that treat Him like an incompetent and unpleasant political administration ("Too little! Too late!"), it is not very comforting. Hunger, after all, is still hunger, evil is still evil, death is still death, even if all of them are somehow necessary. A faith which teaches that every person has equal dignity and value cannot be happy with a world in which dignity and value seem to be destroyed every day. Are there better things to be said?

Talk about God can only be by analogy. The most familiar is of the father. The father helps bring his child into the world. By doing so, he gives it the chance of everything good it will ever receive. But at the same time, he also condemns his child to life, with everything horrible that will happen to it, and, eventually, to death. Is he therefore wrong to do so?

A less common analogy is with a creative artist. In his creation, the artist includes cruelty and suffering. Shakespeare has the innocent Desdemona killed unjustly; he bumps off the loving Cordelia; he sends Hamlet off the rails. This does not lead the reader to think that Shakespeare himself is cruel, only that the cruelty is necessary to the art. If God is the artist of the world, of everything that is, the suffering of the people He has created is no more to be criticised than that created by the playwright. It is tragic, yes, but tragedy is a word for a form of art, the highest form of art. In the Christian account, God did not absent Himself from the tragedy of His own creation, but, through becoming man, became part of it. So even if the whole thing is a ghastly mistake, it is one for which the author has paid the highest price.

Yet even these ways of speaking come out too pat. They may be right, but they do not answer the question of what human suffering feels like. The near-universal experience of people who have come close to death - in war, through illness, in accidents or natural disaster - is that they have contemplated something that is true. The truth has been so terrible - by which I mean not bad, but inspiring of terror - that the experience of it proves almost incommunicable. People often emerge feeling that they now understand more about life, with the paradoxical result that they have less to say about it.

In this respect, the encounter with death is very like the encounter with God. The Book of Job remains by far the greatest account of man's suffering in the face of his creator. God lets Satan persecute Job precisely because he is "perfect and upright", so that everyone may know the



incalculable distance between the ways of God and those of man. When God finally speaks to Job, it is to tell him how little he knows, how puny he is: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?", "Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea?", "Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?". It is only when Job accepts that he knows nothing that he begins to know something: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee."

This story is terrible and true, like a great tempest. It is not an accident, surely, that when the Lord speaks to Job, He does so "out of the whirlwind".

The Theology of the Tsunami

Richard Dawkins

www.secularhumanism.org

The following Op-Ed is from [Free Inquiry magazine](#), Volume 25, Number 3.

I have never found the problem of evil very persuasive as an argument against the existence of deities. There seems to be no obvious reason to presume that your God will be good. The question for me is why one thinks any God, good or evil or indifferent, exists at all. Most of the Greek pantheon sported very human vices, and the "jealous God" of the Old Testament is surely one of the nastiest, most truly evil characters in all fiction. Tsunamis would be just up his street, and, the more misery and mayhem, the better. I have always thought the "problem of evil" was a relatively trivial difficulty for theists, compared to the Argument from Improbability, which is a genuinely powerful, indeed, knockdown argument against the very existence of all forms of unevolved creative intelligence.

Nevertheless, my experience is that godly people, who show no evidence of even beginning to understand the Argument from Improbability, are reduced to quivering embarrassment if not outright loss of faith when confronted with a natural disaster or a major pestilence. Earthquakes, in particular, have traditionally shaken people's faith in a benevolent deity, and December's tsunami provoked a lot of agonized soul-searching on the question, "How can religious people explain something like this?" The most prominent apparent quaverer was the archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Anglican communion. It turned out that he had been traduced by the Daily Telegraph, a notoriously irresponsible and mischievous newspaper and one of several London newspapers that devoted many column inches to this knotty theological conundrum. The archbishop had not in fact said that the tsunami shook his own faith, only that he could sympathize with those who did have doubts.

The most famous precedent, several commentators reminded us, is the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which deeply disturbed Kant and provoked Voltaire's mockery of Leibniz and his philosophical optimism in *Candide*. The Guardian published a flurry of letters to the editor, headed by one from the bishop of Lincoln, who asked God to preserve us from religious people who try to "explain" the tsunami. Other letter writers attempted just that. One clergyman conceded that there was no intellectual answer, just hints of an explanation that "will only be found in a life lived by faith, prayer, contemplation and Christian action." Another clergyman cited the Book of Job, and he thought

he had found the beginnings of an explanation for suffering in Paul's idea that the whole universe was experiencing something akin to the pains of a woman in childbirth: "The argument for the existence of God from design would be fatally flawed if the universe were seen as complete already. Religious believers see the totality of experience as part of a greater narrative moving towards an as yet unimaginable goal."

Is this the kind of thing theologians are paid to do? At least he didn't sink to the level of a professor of theology in my university, who once suggested, during a televised discussion with me and my colleague Peter Atkins, among others, that the Holocaust was God's way of giving the Jews the opportunity to be brave and noble. That remark prompted Dr. Atkins to growl, "May you rot in hell!"

My own initial response to the correspondence on the tsunami was published on December 30:

The Bishop of Lincoln (Letters, December 29) asks to be preserved from religious people who try to explain the tsunami disaster. As well he might. Religious explanations for such tragedies range from loopy (it's payback for original sin) through vicious (disasters are sent to try our faith) to violent (after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, heretics were hanged for provoking God's wrath). But I'd rather be preserved from religious people who give up on trying to explain, yet remain religious.

In the same batch of letters, Dan Rickman says "science provides an explanation of the mechanism of the tsunami but it cannot say why this occurred any more than religion can." There, in one sentence, we have the religious mind displayed before us in all its absurdity. In what sense of the word "why" does plate tectonics not provide the answer? Not only does science know why the tsunami happened, it can give precious hours of warning. If a small fraction of the tax breaks handed out to churches, mosques and synagogues had been diverted into an early warning system, tens of thousands of people, now dead, would have been moved to safety.

Let's get up off our knees, stop cringing before bogeymen and virtual fathers, face reality, and help science to do something constructive about human suffering.

Letters to the editor necessarily have to be brief, and I failed to insure myself against the obvious charge of callousness. Among the onslaught that flooded the letters page the next day, one woman wondered what comfort science could offer to a parent whose child had been swept out to sea. Three letters were from doctors, who could justly claim more experience of human suffering than I could match. One of them deployed a bizarrely literal-minded interpretation of Darwinism: "If I were an atheist, I can't imagine why I should bother to help anyone whose genes might compete with mine." Another lashed petulantly out at science "cloning sheep or cats." The third attacked me personally, describing me as his personal bogeyman: "the atheist version of a door-stepping Jehovah's Witness. An ayatollah without a deity-God help us."

I don't usually come back for a second go, but I was anxious to dispel wanton misunderstanding, so I sent in another letter that was published the following day: It is true that science cannot offer the consolations that your correspondents attribute to prayer, and I am sorry if I seemed a callous ayatollah or a doorstepping bogeyman (Letters, December 31). It is psychologically possible to derive comfort from sincere belief in a nonexistent illusion,



but-silly me-I thought believers might be disillusioned with an omnipotent being who had just drowned 125,000 innocent people (or an omniscient one who failed to warn them). Of course, if you can derive comfort from such a monster, I would not wish to deprive you.

My naive guess was that believers might be feeling more inclined to curse their God than pray to him, and maybe there's some dark comfort in that. But I was trying, however insensitively, to offer a gentler and more constructive alternative. You don't have to be a believer. Maybe there's nobody there to curse. Maybe we are on our own, in a world where plate tectonics and other natural forces occasionally cause appalling catastrophes. Science cannot (yet) prevent earthquakes, but science could have provided just enough warning of the Boxing Day tsunami to save most of the victims and spare the bereaved. Even worse, lowland floodings of the future are threatened by global warming which is preventable by human action, guided by science. And if the comforts afforded by outstretched human arms, warm human words and heartbroken human generosity seem puny against the agony, they at least have the advantage of existing in the real world.

One of the most popular religious responses to natural disasters is "Why me?" It underlay several of the replies to the first of my letters to the Guardian. The correct answer, "Unfortunately you happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time," is admittedly not much comfort. The world is divided into those who can see that the capacity to comfort has no bearing on the truth of a cosmic claim and those who cannot. When I, as a professional educator, meet one of the latter, I come close to despair.

Richard Dawkins's most recent book is The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution. He is the Charles Simonyi Professor of Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University.

Making sense of the disaster

Eco-Justice Notes: Earthquake, Tsunami and God

by Peter Sawtell, Executive Director of Eco-Justice Ministries [1-3-05]

Many years ago, a youth leader in my church was killed in the crash of a small airplane. As the kids in the church youth group struggled to make sense of that tragic death, many of them gave voice to a theology they often heard from their conservative Christian friends. "God called him home," they said.

An Air Force chaplain who was a member of the church quickly set the record straight: "God has better ways of 'calling people home' than slamming them into the ground at 160 miles per hour." The chaplain pushed the church youth to think more deeply about human accountability and the reality of chance, and to be slower in blaming God for what they can't understand.

Tragedy and suffering are theologically difficult when you believe that God is intimately involved in every detail of our individual lives. On the other hand, "God" becomes theologically difficult when God is seen as powerless or disconnected from the events of the world. In between those two extremes, theology and ethics become difficult when the tension between God's involvement and

disengagement is taken seriously.

Last weekend's violent earthquake in Sumatra, and the enormous tsunami that swept across the Indian Ocean, are causing many people of faith to raise difficult questions. As I reflect on the events of this week, I am aware that an eco-justice perspective gets in the way of simple answers, and calls us into that very difficult place of tension.

Because eco-justice rejects any simple division between the human and the natural, because it sees God revealed in the natural order that we affirm as "good," because it calls us to wrestle with matters of faith and ethics that go beyond the personal to touch on institutions and systems -- for all those reasons, an eco-justice theological perspective is both wonderfully appropriate and painfully difficult at a time like this.

Without attempting to be comprehensive, let me draw on that perspective to offer some theological affirmations and convictions that are appropriate for this week's news.

First and foremost, this situation calls on all people -- people of all faiths, and those without faith -- to act on their most basic notions of compassion and solidarity. For most of us, who are far from the disaster scenes, that action means giving money to relief efforts. Loving prayers of compassion that don't also include significant giving simply won't cut it. Your denomination, Church World Service, or the Red Cross will make efficient use of your donation. This is the core ethical matter. Do it.

Beyond the immediate funding of relief efforts, we get into more philosophical territory.

* God did not cause the earthquake and tsunami in some premeditated fashion to punish the wicked, to warn us of the impending end times, or to call the survivors into deeper compassion. (There are writers who have suggested each of these.) If we grow in compassion and relationship as a result of this tragedy, that is a blessing for us and the world. But God has better ways to nurture compassion than killing hundreds of thousands of people.

* The intentions of God, and the workings of nature, are not all about humans. The whole universe is not centered on our experience. The Earth existed long before humans came on the scene, and it will be here long after we're gone. As we ponder the meaning of this event, we must do so in light of the entire history of this planet, and in the context of the entire web of life.

* Awe and humility are appropriate responses to the immense power of the created order. Just as we can be inspired to awe when we consider the size and age of the universe (see Psalm 8), we may also be inspired to keep our own significance in perspective when we look at geologic forces -- slabs of rock that shift with enough force to make the entire planet wobble, and ocean waves that travel thousands of miles at jetliner speeds and arrive with enough power to demolish cities.

* There are limits to the human ability to control the forces of nature. We can never make the world totally safe and predictable. While reasonable steps to live with nature are good and appropriate -- making use of the best possible designs for earthquake-resistant construction, for example, and employing good sanitation to reduce the spread of disease -- attempts to completely control nature, or to pretend that we can stand outside the forces and



relationships of nature, are misguided and guaranteed to fail. Our theology and ethics must help us live as a part of the natural systems of this world.

* The scope of this event pushes us outside of our normal moral categories. There is no human cause behind the earthquake and the waves. The destruction has killed and displaced rich and poor alike -- although, of course, the long-term effects will be hardest on the poor. There are not, apparently, any gross failures or abuses in providing available relief and aid -- only the inability of local, national and international systems to respond adequately to such a widespread catastrophe. Blame and fault, sin and evil, are categories that just don't fit here. Rather than pointing fingers at others, we do better to acknowledge our own limitations.

* It is in the long-term projects for rebuilding that we must work toward our best understandings of justice for all involved. Let us seek to establish societies that provide care and empowerment for the poor. Let us rebuild with a commitment to the most sustainable societies.

Theology is easier when we believe that God is either totally in control, or utterly powerless. As people of faith, though, our goal is not to have a simple and tidy theology, but to have a theology that is honest and insightful in the most challenging situations.

In this time of great human disaster, may we first of all seek to meet the urgent and long-term needs. Then, in our faithful musings, may we not shy away from hard questions and challenging demands. For in that place of tension we will find real faithfulness.

Shalom!

Peter Sawtell
Executive Director
Eco-Justice Ministries

E-mail: ministry@eco-justice.org
Website: <http://www.eco-justice.org/>

Tsunami Theology for Dummies

www.wolverton-mountain.com

The horrific tsunami has come and gone with its unimaginable disaster and destruction over vast areas of South Asia. As people are slowly trying to get back on their feet, they and the rest of the world are attempting to understand how this could have happened. Beyond the scientific explanation of massive tectonic plate shifting, there are the theological questions that have been spawned in the tsunami's devastation. How could God do this or allow this to happen? Perhaps, it is time to do some tsunami theology for dummies—because a lot of dumb theological things are being said about this event.

It is obvious that this disaster has cut across all religious faiths without any one religion having been spared. Every major world religion and many minor faiths have lost large numbers of believers. For most causal observers, no one religion can take any solace of being spared due to their supposed "true faith."

In spite of cutting across all religious beliefs, the

truly dumbest theological statement that I heard in the wake of the tsunami was made by a white, American woman in her mid-twenties who avoided being counted with the tens of thousands less fortunate. Upon her return to the States, she ascribed her escaping the fate of so many others to her God saving her. While we don't normally make the soundest theological statements having just avoided such a traumatic event, she and her listeners need nonetheless to reexamine her theology. It is way off the mark.

Think about how that statement sounds. Here is a young, white Christian, affluent, American tourist, who believes that God hovered over the raging tower of cascading water, spotted her amongst the hundreds of thousands facing drowning, and intervened on her behalf to rescue her. What is wrong with that belief? Do you *really* think that God selected this one gal for rescue? I'd like to know what she did or believed to have this special *deus ex machina* treatment from God.

What does that theological picture paint for us? God rescues someone who can afford to vacation in some Asian paradise and allows tens of thousands of others to perish—mothers who couldn't save their children or fathers who couldn't protect their families already on the lowest rung of the poverty ladder. Get real.

Allow me to offer a primer of tsunami theology for dummies. We all need to take this primer before we fail our theology of life.

1. Be careful about making theological statements about God. The height of religious hubris is thinking that we can plumb the depth of the almighty. The true nature of God is well-beyond our reasoning ability. About all we can say for sure is what isn't theologically true—like, God thinks that I am so special that God treats me differently than all the rest of the world.

2. All religions have been able to glimpse a tiny bit of divine truth. In addition, all religions have vast repositories of theological nonsense, which was manufactured by people. This nonsense often passes as truth; nonetheless, it remains theological gobbledook.

3. We ascribe our limited human vocabulary to defining the divine with often disastrous results. Terms like all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect and loving are copied from our vocabulary and pasted upon God. They seem to make sense on clear and bright spring days, but when chaos strikes, our man-made definitions result in contradictions. For example, how could a loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God allow this tsunami to devastate so much of coastal South Asia?

4. In desperation, we ask, why didn't God *do something*? Okay, ask that dumb question. I'll play God in this mock dialogue. As God, I would turn your question back upon you and ask, "What would you have me do?" In response, you would say, "Prevent the tsunami!" Using the power that I possess, I intervene before this latest tsunami occurred and stopped the plate shifts that resulted in this horrific loss of life. Now, are you happy? You would say, "Now, that is the kind of God that I thought you were." However, unbeknownst to you in your theological bliss, the pressure is building up deep in the earth's crust, because I prevented this natural pressure release valve of tectonic plate shifting. Weeks or months later, a catastrophic explosion occurs beneath the surface of the world. The result of this exploration dwarfs anything seen since



creation and hundreds of millions of people die in a hellish moment. Are you satisfied?

5. I think that all that God requires of us is to show reverence for God and to treat others as we should. Theology is an exercise largely beyond our abilities. Actually, loving our fellow human beings apparently is also beyond our ability. Therefore, let's work on love before we do too much theologizing.

In closing, it is numerically highly unlikely that many of us will face catastrophic natural disasters like tsunamis, but it is for certain that we have and will face personal tragedies that will sweep into our lives. We need to think and rethink our thoughts about God before the next horrific event in our lives.

This article appeared in the Dixon *Telegraph* on 2/11/05.

Tsunami, Sovereignty, and Mercy

Dr. John Piper

John Piper is the Pastor for Preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, and studied at Wheaton College, where he first sensed God's call to enter the ministry. He went on to earn degrees from Fuller Theological Seminary (B.D.) and the University of Munich (D.theol.). For six years he taught Biblical Studies at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and in 1980 accepted the call to serve as pastor at Bethlehem. John is the author of more than 20 books and his preaching and teaching is featured on the daily radio program Desiring God. He and wife Noël have four sons, one daughter, and four grandchildren.

After the loss of his ten children owing to a "natural disaster" (Job 1:19), Job said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). At the end of the book, the inspired writer confirms Job's understanding of what happened. He says Job's brothers and sisters "comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him" (Job 42:11). This has several crucial implications for us as we think about the calamity in the Indian Ocean.

1. Satan is not ultimate, God is.

Satan had a hand in Job's misery, but not the decisive hand. God gave Satan permission to afflict Job (Job 1:12; 2:10). But Job and the writer of this book treat God as the ultimate and decisive cause. When Satan afflicts Job with sores, Job says to his wife, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10), and the writer calls these satanic sores "the evil that the Lord had brought upon him" (Job 42:11). So Satan is real. Satan brings misery. But Satan is not ultimate or decisive. He is on a leash. He goes no farther than God decisively permits.

2. Even if Satan caused the earthquake in the Indian Ocean the day after Christmas, he is not the decisive cause of 100,000+ deaths, God is.

God claims power over tsunamis in Job 38:8 when he asks Job rhetorically, "Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb . . . and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed?'" Psalm 89:8-9 says, "O Lord . . . you rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them." And Jesus himself has the same control today as he once did

over the deadly threats of waves: "He . . . rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm" (Luke 8:24). In other words, even if Satan caused the earthquake, God could have stopped the waves.

3. Destructive calamities in this world mingle judgment and mercy.

Their purposes are not simple. Job was a godly man and his miseries were not God's punishment (Job 1:1, 8). Their design was purifying not punishment (Job 42:6). But we do not know the spiritual condition of Job's children. Job was certainly concerned about them (Job 1:5). God may have taken their life in judgment. If that is true, then the same calamity proved in the end to be mercy for Job and judgment on his children. This is true of all calamities. They mingle judgment and mercy. They are both punishment and purification. Suffering, and even death, can be both judgment and mercy at the same time.

The clearest illustration of this is the death of Jesus. It was both judgment and mercy. It was judgment on Jesus because he bore our sins (not his own), and it was mercy toward us who trust him to bear our punishment (Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24) and be our righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). Another example is the curse that lies on this fallen earth. Those who do not believe in Christ experience it as judgment, but believers experience it as, merciful, though painful, preparation for glory. "The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope" (Romans 8:20). This is God's subjection. This is why there are tsunamis.

Who suffers from this fallen world of natural disasters? All of us, Christians included: "Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). For those who cast themselves on the mercy of Christ these afflictions are "preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17). And when death comes, it is a door to paradise. But for those who do not treasure Christ, suffering and death are God's judgment. "It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17).

For children, who are too young to process mentally the revelation of God in nature or Scripture, death is not the final word of judgment. God's commitment to display his justice publicly means that he does not finally condemn sinful people who could not physically construe natural or special revelation (Romans 1:20). There is a difference between suppressing revelation that one can mentally comprehend (Romans 1:18), and not having a brain sufficient to comprehend it at all. Therefore, when small children suffer and die, we may not assume they are being punished or judged. No matter how horrible the suffering or death, God can turn it for their greater good.

4. The heart that Christ gives to his people feels compassion for those who suffer, no matter what their faith.

When the Bible says, "Weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15), it does not add, "unless God caused the weeping." Job's comforters would have done better to weep with Job than talk so much. That does not change when we discover that Job's suffering was ultimately from God. No, it is right to weep with those who suffer. Pain is pain, no matter who causes it. We are all sinners. Empathy flows not from the



causes of pain, but the company of pain. And we are all in it together.

Finally, Christ calls us to show mercy to those who suffer, even if they do not deserve it.

That is the meaning of mercy—undeserved help. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27). Therefore, pray earnestly for Scott Purser and his team as they investigate the best way that the Global Diaconate can mercifully respond with the love of Christ to the calamity around the Indian Ocean.

In the merciful hands of Almighty God,

Pastor John

This article has been reprinted with permission. By John Piper. © Desiring God. Web site: <http://www.desiringgod.org/>.

Natural Disasters: A Biblical Perspective

by Tom Robinson

http://www.gnmagazine.org/issues/gn57/tsunami_biblical.htm

Following are points we should keep in mind concerning the biblical perspective on tragedies, regardless of their scale or circumstances:

1. God has said in Bible prophecy that natural disasters would grow in frequency and intensity as the end of the age approaches—to shake people out of their complacency and lead them to seek Him (Matthew 24:7; Luke 21:25-26; Revelation 6:12; 11:13; 16:18).
2. In His design for the world, God allows many events to run their course according to “time and chance” (Ecclesiastes 9:11), so that many tragedies are, for those affected, accidental and unforeseeable.
3. Those who die in accidents or natural disasters are not necessarily greater sinners than those who survive (Luke 13:1-5).
4. Personal tragedies or calamities are not necessarily the result of one’s sins (John 9:2-3).
5. Natural disasters or accidents should humble us, helping us to see our dependence on God to sustain and deliver us (Revelation 16:8-11).
6. Natural disasters have sometimes been the direct judgment of God on a rebellious humanity (Genesis 6:6-7, 11-13, 17; 18:20; 19:24-25).
7. Some natural disasters are made worse by man’s poor judgments (Proverbs 14:12) and age-long rejection of God and His laws, resulting in worsening environmental and climatic conditions.
8. God is a truly loving God who is working out a great plan for all humanity (John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4; 1 Corinthians 15:22-24).
9. Converted Christians who die in natural disasters will be resurrected to immortality in the first resurrection at the return of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 20:4-6).
10. Non-Christians who die in natural disasters, those who never had a genuine understanding of God or real

opportunity for eternal salvation, will be raised in the second or general resurrection to live again in the flesh with their first real opportunity to learn God’s way, repent and be saved (John 5:28-29; Matthew 12:41-42; Revelation 20:5).

11. The multitudes of humanity who are raised in the second or general resurrection will experience joyful and abundant life under the rule of the Kingdom of God (Ezekiel 37:12-14).

12. The sufferings experienced now in “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4)—this era of man’s self-rule under the influence of Satan the devil—are writing a lesson of experience about what it means to live in a world cut off from God and His ways.

13. We don’t know all the reasons God brings or permits specific calamities or why particular people are made to suffer by them, but we should trust that in God’s omniscience and ultimate wisdom He knows how to work out what is best for everyone in the end (Romans 8:28; 1 Timothy 2:4).

14. Jesus Christ will eventually return to usher in the rule of the Kingdom of God (Revelation 11:15; Daniel 7:14), under which natural disasters will no longer plague mankind.

15. When all humanity is at last glorified, there will be no more pain, suffering or sorrow (Revelation 21:4).

16. All the sufferings of this brief present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory we will ultimately experience for all eternity to come (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18). GN

Theodicy (Against the Problem of Evil)

Kenneth Cauthen

<http://www.bigissueground.com/atheistground/cauthen-theodicy.shtml>

Theodicy deals with the problem of evil. Usually it is an attempt to show that it is possible to affirm the omnipotence of God, the love of God, and the reality of evil without contradiction. The skeptic’s argument generally is that given the reality of evil, we must sacrifice either the power (omnipotence) or the love (goodness) of God. A dilemma arises. If we give up the omnipotence of God, it appears that God cannot prevent or overcome evil. If we forego the goodness of God, it seems that God will not prevent or overcome evil. Most theodicies attempt to show that this dilemma is only apparent and that it is possible to affirm both that God is all-powerful and perfectly loving, despite the presence of real evil in the world.

Before we proceed, we must note that some Christian theologians refuse to accept the definition of the problem in these terms. They argue that evil is a practical reality that requires resources that enable us to deal with it and overcome it. This the Gospel provides to those who have faith and seek to love God and one another. These theologians contend that to define evil as a theoretical question that poses difficulties regarding either the existence or the character of God is to take a false step and one that leads to no good consequences. Hence, this solution to the theodicy question is to deny that it is a theoretical problem in the first instance and therefore does not require a solution in these terms. Another way to put it is to say that they are quite willing to let the question of reconciling the reality of evil with the power and goodness



of God remain as pure MYSTERY and to devote their full attention to the question of coping with evil in good faith.

Everyone would agree that evil is a practical concern. We do need resources that enable us to cope with it. However, many theologians contend that suffering also has a theoretical dimension. Faith must seek understanding as well as victory over evil. These thinkers typically proceed to offer a number of "appeals" that lessen if not eliminate the apparent contradiction. Some of the "appeals" most often made are:

1. Suffering is a punishment for sin.
2. We are creatures of flesh and blood who are vulnerable to accident, disease, and other destructive assaults upon our existence and well-being.
3. We are free moral beings and can misuse our freedom to cause harm to ourselves or others.
4. Suffering is designed by God to be a part of the world so that by facing the challenge evil poses, we can freely move toward moral perfection, which is God's aim for us.
5. We live in a law-abiding world containing many beings interacting with each other. Destructive interactions and consequence are bound to follow. Yet it is the law-abiding character of the world that enables us to learn and to carry out our purposes.
6. The world has an excellent design within the limits of what is actually possible. Any other design would likely have produced a less favorable ratio of good in relation to evil. The strongest version of this argument insists that this is the best of all possible worlds.
7. Satan (a superhuman being with free will who went wrong) is the cause of much suffering and evil in the world.

From such appeals one can argue that the factors that make evil likely are essential to there being a world at all and/or to the excellence of its design. For example, the fact that God made us free is a good feature of the world that we would not want to change. But it means that human beings and Satan who misuse that freedom can cause great misery. In short, any good world would carry with it the possibility of evil. Therefore, if there is to be a world at all and a good world, evil is a likely feature of it, but this does not at all impugn either the power or the goodness of God.

While those who make them believe that these "appeals" go a long way toward providing an answer to the question as to why there is so much evil in the world that an all-powerful, loving God created, most admit that we are still far from a complete solution. Hence, the final "appeal" is usually to MYSTERY. At this point, they join with those who refuse to see evil as a theoretical issue in the first place. Not everyone uses all these "appeals," and there may be others. Many modern theologians, e. g., would have difficulty referring to suffering as a punishment for sin, and many do not believe in a literal Satan.

All of the above proposals assume all three elements in the basic framework: omnipotence, perfect goodness, and the reality of gratuitous evil. Another set of proposals modifies one or more of these factors. A few question God's goodness. Others qualify or reject omnipotence in favor of a limited God. Still others insist that what appears to us as purely evil serves a justifying purpose known only to God or is the necessary means to a larger and compensating good that could not be had otherwise. Along these lines a strong tradition in classical theology insisted that God permitted evil as a means toward a greater good. The advantage of these approaches is that they make a rational solution to the theodicy problem much easier. Moreover, one can still make the same appeals that have already been listed, if they prove useful. The disadvantages, however, are

considerable. Obviously, questioning either omnipotence or perfect goodness in God puts one outside the mainstream of Christian tradition. Moreover, each non-orthodox alternative comes with a cost. Questioning divine goodness makes faith difficult since a morally ambiguous God is not totally trustworthy. Questioning omnipotence threatens to undermine hope since a God limited in power may not be able to overcome all evil and guarantee a final victory of justice and goodness.

My own conclusion is that the traditional responses are inadequate. I propose that we must limit the power of God in order to preserve the goodness of God and reluctantly accept the consequences of compromising omnipotence. I believe that the reason that God does not prevent or overcome some evil is that God cannot. Only a Suffering, Struggling, Limited God will do. I have developed a doctrine of God along these lines.

© 1997

About the author...

Kenneth Cauthen is the John Price Crozer Griffith emeritus Professor of Theology at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in Rochester, New York. He is the author of twenty books, including *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism*, which was the standard text in the field for a quarter of a century. Born in Georgia, he was educated at Mercer, Yale, Emory, and Vanderbilt, receiving a BA, BD, MA and PhD. He has served as Baptist pastor, college professor at Mercer University, and as a professor of theology for forty years.

Cauthen is dedicated to defending liberal Christianity. To this end, he runs a web site and a regularly updated blog. He welcomes e-mails responding to his perspective.

WHY DOESN'T GOD PREVENT MAN-MADE OR NATURAL DISASTERS?

B.A. Robinson

<http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/1283.htm>

Quotations:

"If God does not judge America, He is going to have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah." Billy Graham.

"Yet they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit. So He turned and became their enemy and He Himself fought against them." Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), Isaiah 63:10.

"God gently persuades all entities towards this perfection by providing each of them with a glimpse of the divine vision of a better future. And yet all entities retain the freedom to depart from that vision." Sheela Pawar, Center for Process Studies. 4

"...God is so transcendent that he creates room for others to exist and maintains a relationship with them...God is so powerful as to be able to stoop down and humble Himself...(and) God is so stable and secure as to be able to risk suffering and change." Clark H. Pinnock, proponent of Open Theism. 6,7

Why do terrible things happen in the presence of God?

When a child is run over and killed by a drunk driver, the parents ask why it happened. They are not asking for an



engineering analysis of masses, velocities, and forces. They are asking a moral question.

When an immense national tragedy happens, as in the case of the 2001-SEP-11 terrorist attack on New York City and the Pentagon, the whole nation and hundreds of millions of people in other countries ask why. Again, they are not seeking a description of the fireball temperature, the speed and mass of the airplane, temperature of the steel I-beams, etc. They are again asking a moral question.

This question leads us to examine our basic beliefs about the nature of the God that most North Americas believe in, variously called Allah, God, the Trinity, and Jehovah. Most religions teach that God has a number of attributes. Among them are:

Omniscience: all-knowing, continuously aware of every movement by every person on earth. Thus God is aware of a tragedy as or before it happens. Omnipotence: all-powerful; capable of performing any act, even those which violate the laws of nature. The first few chapters of Genesis tell how God created an entire universe by simply speaking it into existence. Thus God is certainly able intrude into the world and prevent a tragedy. A loving deity, who cares for the world, human beings and other life forms that he created. "God is absolute righteousness, love, goodness, and justice." 2 Thus, humans expect their God to prevent tragedy.

But he didn't. Over 5,000 lives were snuffed out in New York and Washington by terrorist attacks on 2001-SEP-11; this caused massive grief and pain to tens of thousands of spouses, partners, family members and friends. In 1998, tropical storm Mitch killed more than 130 people and made a half a million people homeless in Honduras and Nicaragua. Over 1,450 people died in 1999 during a earthquake in Taiwan. About 25,000 people a year are murdered in the U.S. All of these events could be prevented, by an omnipotent, omniscient, caring God.

A person who sees a child about to run into the path of a truck would be considered profoundly immoral if they didn't try to prevent the accident. Why does God seem to behave like a very immoral person? There are thousands of ways in which an omnipotent God could have terminated the WTS and Pentagon terrorist attack before it started. He could have sent the hearts of the approximately 18 terrorists into ventricular fibrillation; he could have struck them blind; he could have created an anxiety attack in each terrorist that would have prevented him from taking action. He could have deflected storm Mitch away from land. He could have replaced one large earthquake in Taiwan with a few non-destructive quakes. There are endless possibilities. But God let them all happen. Why?

It is these types of event that can cause some people to become mad at God and to lose their faith. But it drives even more people to examine their religious beliefs, and perhaps grow spiritually.

Theodicy: an unsolvable paradox?

Such puzzles lead us to the problem of theodicy -- how can such evil and suffering exist in a universe created by a good, loving God? This is a centuries-old, unresolved paradox that is inherent in all religions that include a belief in a personal all-loving, all knowing, and all-powerful God.

In Archibald MacLeish's play, "J.B." the title character expresses the theodicy paradox eloquently: "If God is God He is not good, if God is good He is not God; take the even, take the odd..." 1,2

Christian Fundamentalist R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, is considered by many to be a main spiritual leader of the Southern Baptists. He touched on theodicy during an address at the Seminary's Alumni Memorial Chapel on 2001-SEP-13, two days after the tragedy in New York and Washington. 1

He assigned full responsibility for the New York City and Washington attacks on the (then) unknown terrorists. He said: "We dare not lack the moral courage to call these acts what they are-murderous acts of mass terror. We dare not dignify the murderers by explaining their cause. No cause, however righteous, can justify such acts. And, no righteous cause could produce such acts."

Earlier in his talk, Dr. Mohler asked: "How could a good God allow this to happen? How can a God of love allow killers to kill, terrorists to terrorize, and the wicked to escape without a trace?" He acknowledges that God is omnipotent -- infinitely powerful -- and thus could have prevented the tragedy. He said: "This much we know-we cannot speak of God's decree in a way that would imply Him to be the author of evil, and we cannot fall back to speak of His mere permission, as if this allows a denial of His sovereignty and active will." He quoted Romans 8:28: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, who are the called according to His purpose." He admits that humans cannot know the full truth: "We dare not speak on God's behalf to explain why He allowed these particular acts of evil to happen at this time to these persons and in this manner. Yet, at the same time, we dare not be silent when we should testify to the God of righteousness and love and justice who rules over all in omnipotence. Humility requires that we affirm all that the Bible teaches, and go no further. There is much we do not understand. As Charles Spurgeon explained, when we cannot trace God's hand, we must simply trust His heart."

Many consider these answers to be unsatisfactory. They yearn for a more complete understanding of the puzzle. Theologians have been debating the theodicy paradox for centuries, without making a great deal of progress. It may be impossible to solve the puzzle while still believing in a God with traditional characteristics; it may be necessary to abandon belief in one or more attributes. Perhaps God is not (or chooses to not appear to be) omniscient, omnipotent, or loving. In fact, some Atheists have used the theodicy problem as an indicator or proof that a personal God does not exist.

Attempts to resolve the theodicy paradox:

Some religions have solved or partly solved this problem. Most do it by reducing or abandoning one of the attributes of God. A few religious leaders have admitted that they simply cannot solve the puzzle. This takes courage when faced with multitudes of people who desperately want answers:

Deists believe that God created the universe, set it in motion, and then withdrew from the scene. He hasn't been seen since. They regard God as not having omniscience; he has not chosen to remain aware of what is happening on earth. Most of the writers of the U.S. founding documents were Deists.

Zoroastrianism was once the religion of ancient Persia. It remains a small religion whose members live largely in India.

Their religion has largely settled the paradox. They promote a cosmic dualism between two more or less equal forces: A powerful God Ahura Mazda, who is the only deity worthy of



being worshipped, and An evil spirit of violence and death Angra Mainyu, who opposes Ahura Mazda.

The resulting cosmic conflict involves the entire universe now and until the end of time. Humans must choose which deity to follow. Angra Mainyu can generate great evil, like the terrorist acts in New York City and Washington. Here, Angra Mainyu would be seen as largely responsible for the terrorist attack; Ahura Mazda is powerful, but not all-powerful. Thus, he was unable to stop it. Some religious liberals believe that Judaism (and thus Christianity) picked up its belief in heaven, hell, the final judgment, and Satan as an all-evil entity, from Zoroastrianism.

Conservative Christians, Muslims and others believe in a personal Satan, an all-evil devil who roams the world seeking whom he might be able to destroy. Most evil occurrences are attributed to Satan. God is often viewed, by Christians, as providing a protective shield around Christian countries. But this is only a partial answer to the problem of theodicy. It begs the question: if God is omniscient and omnipotent, why did he not curtail the activities of Satan and prevent him from succeeding in his plan to cause natural or man-made disasters?. At the National Cathedral four days after the WTS and Pentagon tragedies, the Reverend Doctor Billy Graham, said that many times, he has asked the question, 'Why does God permit evil?'...he said he has never answered that question fully to his satisfaction. Later, he said that America needs spiritual renewal and revival. He believed that the terrorist attack brought the country to the start of that process.

The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, picked up that theme. 5 He explained that God allowed this evil deed to proceed because it was part of his plan to redeem America. Farrakhan explained that "Whenever a nation becomes great and powerful by God's Permission, as America has... and that nation then has a spiritual lapse and begins to sink into moral decline, the Qur'an teaches that Allah (God) raises a messenger, but he raises that messenger from among the poor and the abject to guide and to warn the great and the powerful...the Qur'an teaches that Allah (God) then seizes that nation with distress and affliction, that it might humble itself. For only in humility can the proud and the powerful heed the Guidance of God, which is mercy and grace from Himself. Allah (God) used this tragedy, hopefully, to bring a great nation to Himself." Thus, God caused the tragedy, and worked through the terrorists to accomplish mass murder. But God did this in order to create a greater good: to cause the entire nation to come close to God.

Rev. Jack Rogers, moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church discussed the terrorist attacks with members of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Fruit Heights, UT. He said that the church as well as the world will never be the same. He said: "It has been asked that if God is good why do evil things happen to good people? We don't know the answer to that but we know that we belong to God and he will give us hope and enable us to go on." 8

Atheists have no problem with the theodicy paradox for the simply reason that they have no belief in the existence of God. Some positively deny that God exists. Atheists are generally moral relativists and conclude that a given act may be considered immoral by some people, morally neutral by others, and moral by still others. Within the terrorists' personal belief system, murdering thousands of people was a moral act because it strikes back against America -- a country that they often refer to as Satan. If they had a way to kill 60,000 people instead of 6,000, they

probably would have taken it. They were so motivated by this belief that they were willing to sacrifice their lives to accomplish their goal. Bad things happen simply because people want to do them in order to accomplish what they feel is a great moral good. God does not intervene because, according to Atheists, there is no evidence that he exists.

Rabbi Kushner, author of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," concludes that the theodicy paradox can only be solved only by redefining the attributes of God. Viewing God as all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful leads to internal contradictions. Something has to go. He suggests that we abandon the omnipotence of God and believe in a deity with only finite powers to influence people's actions, but who remains all-knowing and all-loving. Kushner's God didn't prevent the terrorists because he didn't have the power to do so. God can only cry with the victims.

Process thought was originally promoted the early 1900s by a French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson. Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne developed it further. It deals with the interrelationships of all entities in the universe. "It has been utilized to provide insights into aesthetics, biology, economics, education, interpersonal relations, physics, physiology, political theory, psychology, the relationship among the world's religions, social law, and theology." 4 One of the three main areas of process thought is process theology. It teaches that that God affects history indirectly through gentle persuasion and not directly by coercion. He does not intrude directly in human activities; he does not violate the laws of nature by creating a miracle. Rather, "God gently persuades all entities towards this perfection by providing each of them with a glimpse of the divine vision of a better future. And yet all entities retain the freedom to depart from that vision." 4 Individuals retain the freedom to reject God's messages and to engage in mass murder, genocide and other evils.

Open theism, also called Free Will Theism is an alternate understanding of the nature of the Christian God. According to Dr. John Sanders: "God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God's will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give and take relationships with us....God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decisions, adapting his own plans to fit the changing situation. God does not control everything that happens. Rather, he is open to receiving input from his creatures. In loving dialogue, God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being." In his talk referred to above, Dr. Mohler refers to "openness theists" who "argue that God is always ready with Plan B when Plan A fails. He is infinitely resourceful, they stress, just not really sovereign" in the conventional sense of the term.

In this belief system, humans are ultimately responsible for many of their deeds -- good and bad. When faced with a terrible tragedy, God accepts it and attempts to make positive results come out of the evil. God is not omniscient in the normal meaning of that word; he cannot foretell the future in detail because so much of the future is up to a complex interaction of countless decisions by individual humans, all of whom possess free will. God is only able to adapt to events and nudge the future along in what he feels is the correct direction. Openness theism is supported by more than 30 biblical passages in which God indicates that he does not control the future. In these passages, he repented of his previous decisions.



References:

R.A. Mohler, Jr., "Truth-telling in a time of tragedy: What words dare we speak, when we dare not be silent?," Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, at: <http://www.sbts.edu/mohler-response.doc> Archibald MacLeish, "J.B.: A Play in Verse," Houghton Mifflin, (1956), Page 11. Read reviews or order this book safely from Amazon.com online book store Harold S. Kushner, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," Schocken Books, (1981). Read reviews or order this book Sheela Pawar, "Basis Synopsis of Process Thought," Center for Process Studies, at: <http://www.ctr4process.org/WHATISPRCS/> "World Press Conference from Mosque Maryam: The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan responds to the ATTACK on AMERICA," 2001-SEP-16, at: <http://www.noi.org/press-events/> Excerpt from Dr. John Sanders, "The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God," Intervarsity Press, (1994). The book includes writings from five scholars. Read reviews or order this book "Open Theism Information Site," at: <http://www.opentheism.org/> Jamie Lampros, "Church faces controversial issues," at: <http://www.standard.net/standard/news/>

Copyright © 2001 by Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance; Originally written: 2001-SEP-15

A biblical and theological reflection on tsunami disaster - was God cruel and heartless?

<http://www.globalministries.org/sasia/sa021105.htm>
February 11, 2005

Introduction

If there was anything good that came out of the terrible disaster, it was, if we may say so, the great attention God has received. Godlessness is not the deliberate choice of most people of South Asia. But the highly secularized way of life which becomes hectic by the year has effectively crowded God out. We have become very conscious of our religious identity, no doubt, but that is because it is most often mixed with our ethnic identities, which in turn have been highly politicized. There is also a good deal of utilitarian and self-centered religiosity to secure divine favors and divine protection. Hardly do most religious people care to live giving priority to God's concerns for the world of human affairs and for the realm of nature. Are we saying, therefore, that God has brought this terrible disaster upon the nation so that we may become seriously God conscious? Not at all. Paradoxically, the positive outcome of turning our minds towards God is rather out of a sense of utter helplessness; or out of widely prevalent fears about divine retribution; or out of a superstitious belief that everything that we cannot understand must originate with God; or out of a not so well thought out idea of how God who is Sovereign and Almighty relates to the realm of nature and to the realm of human affairs; or last but not least in the minds of some Christians it is a divine portent of the End of all things that is fast approaching. None of the above sources of inspiration for thinking about God can be seen to be valid on careful theological reflection. Then, the question, "What is so positive about the increased attention God has received?" does indeed prop up most legitimately. The positive outcome, one can dare to say, is that there is now a greater openness to seek real understanding as people who try to come to terms

through one or the other of the above ways are not entirely happy with their own understanding. The facts that the tragedy has involved thousands of innocent children, that it has not spared any one religious/ethnic group, that the victims do not belong to any one particular political affiliation, that while the majority of those who were swept away were poor coastline dwellers, quite a few rich holiday makers and foreign tourists have also not been able to escape the sweep of the monstrous waves...have made it impossible for anyone group to point an accusing finger at those who were hurt by the tragedy as those who were not on good terms with God. Similarly the traditional belief that God protects the godly and reeks vengeance on the ungodly also fails to wash as many devotees who went to Church on the fateful Sunday, simply because the Church was close to the sea, had to face the fury of the waves as also some Hindus who went to perform some rites by the sea got swept away. One Pastor of a Charismatic Independent Church, it seems, when the people panicked when water from the first not so fierce wave entered the Church asked people to remain calm and pray fervently and soon a monstrous second wave entered the Church and swept all away including the pastor. So the theory of divine protection or of retribution to the impious only, from any point of view of self-righteousness and exclusivity stands on shaky grounds.

While God is sovereign the fact that nature is not perfect but has inherent imperfections and defects and the fact that humankind abuses and exploits nature with a sense of nonchalant irresponsibility are often forgotten.

For those of us who are not deists, i.e. that God would not interfere with the wound up mechanism of nature even when it is aberrant, the question, "Could not God have protected the tragic and untimely death of so many infants and children?" does persist. Neither can we resign ourselves to God's sovereign right to be arbitrary under the cover that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and so we must humbly accept what God saw fit to do.

The possibility of imperfect nature's erratic outbursts from time to time, however, has to be reckoned with. With our increased knowledge of geological factors we do need to do all that we can do to improve our detection and warning mechanisms and avoid danger prone zones as dwelling places. Stories are current that a Hawaii based research centre did try to warn at least South Asian countries towards which Tsunami waves were traveling but nobody took the warning messages seriously. If this is true, the blame is squarely on the shoulders of those irresponsible people who did nothing to act upon the warning at least with respect to those lost in these countries and not at all upon God.

The need, however, to seek theological understanding cannot be wished away by seeking an explanation in terms of aberrant nature or on the basis of human neglect. For we believe that God has a concern for all of life and is meaningfully and purposefully involved in leading creation towards new creation and humanity towards new humanity in Christ. Neither can such tragedies be understood simply as temporary casualties belonging to the fast passing away realm of the "Not-Yet" but which will be off set at the Resurrection. Jesus refutes such a resignation of Martha at the grave sight of Lazarus. His intervention to bring Lazarus back to life shows that tragic contingencies of temporal life are viewed with deep concern by God. What are the implications and symbolic significance of Christ's action to bring Lazarus back to life for the mass tragedy we have suffered? Our fresh theological seeking is not just to satisfy our academic curiosity but to help many people who are

deeply troubled and are looking for a more satisfactory understanding. Otherwise they are likely to settle down to one or the other of the traditional views which does not do justice to God's universal Love, perfect Justice and deep concern for all life here and now. God's Future is integrally bound up with God's present. Let us engage in the search with the assured help of God the Holy Spirit. Let us hope that any insights gained could become instrumental to make the world more conscious of the loving purposes of God.

1. A Statement of Method

We will begin by making a statement on the method. We take the stories of the bible used in the discussion without entering upon any questions of authenticity. However, we do not follow the method of quoting a text to counter the use of another text. We do not believe either that simply quoting a text from the bible is sufficient to prove any theological convictions supposedly arising from it. However, we do need to recognize that theological conviction does depend on a choice of text(s) and engaging in a dialogue with those texts which we choose to relativize. Our particular choice also must be shown to be correct. This process of selection does depend on a prior understanding of God which in turn will depend on Jesus' own affirmations about God and on his understanding of God's purposes. We shall also seek a justification from what can be undeniably understood from the way in which God could be seen at work in the day to day affairs of the world. Using this method we may sometimes deliberately relativize one text in the light of another. The method we follow, we hope, will become obvious as we go along. Earlier we referred to the ideas of divine retribution, and God's arbitrary interventions in nature as a warning or as a portent of impending doom for all as untenable. Using our method of biblical reflection we need to demonstrate why such explanations do not bring honor to God. We shall then try to understand the way God relates to the realms of nature and of human affairs. Finally, we shall seek to envision God at work in the midst of and through the partnership of the victims and the bereaved survivors. Finally we shall gather up our thoughts and try to understand the challenge to all the rest of humanity who remain unhurt but are nevertheless concerned to be instruments in God's hands and to those others who are cozy, comfortable, smug and complacent thinking that they are indeed God's favorites!

2. It is Not Divine Retribution

In the introductory paragraph we already mentioned the untenability of this idea merely by taking into account that most were innocent victims and that in its broad sweep Tsunami included the pious as well as the impious, the good and the bad, innocent children and adult sinners. However, those who depend entirely on the support of a few isolated bible texts and are also given to exclusivist attitudes adamantly stick to the idea of divine protection for the Elect Faithful and divine retribution or divine abandonment of the others. Even those who are not necessarily convinced fundamentalists have been heavily influenced by this idea. A colleague of mine in the Seminary who teaches English came visiting bringing greetings of the season two days after the terrible tragedy. The very first words he uttered were that God has established that God is a Vengeful God as the bible testifies. Happily, this friend left our sitting room convinced that it was wrong to attribute the disaster to a divine visitation with punishment. Disappointingly, however, I have not had the same success with many others. These people by no means could be described as adamant fundamentalists but insist that it has to be understood as an Act of God. It is comforting in a strange

way to accept with a sense of resignation that it is God's doing either as punishment or as an act of warning for it is much better to fall into the hands of God than into the hands of the Devil! Such friends need to be helped. So we must first trace the roots of this problem which can be located to simply internalizing certain texts to the neglect of other texts and the general prevailing ignorance about what Jesus had said and proclaimed about God. There is also the subconscious desire in most of us which prods us to find satisfaction in the thought that inasmuch as we have been spared we are special in the eyes of God.

3. Internalization of Certain Selected Texts

God visited Egypt with many plagues and pestilences using forces of nature and some peculiar abnormalities as well. God enabled the people of Israel to cross the Red Sea by parting its waves through a powerful wind but by making the sea to return to its normal turbulence killed all the Egyptian pursuers. Similarly during Joshua's campaign against those who had besieged Gibeon he was able to command the sun and the moon to stand still until he had routed them and both the sun and the moon obeyed Joshua's command. In addition to making the sun and the moon stand still God also assisted the campaign by raining hail stones upon the enemy forces and killed many. It is said that those who were killed by the hail storm were more in number than those killed by Joshua's sword. These two stories clearly establish that God is in control of the wind and the waves and all forces of nature and that God will use forces of nature either to protect God's people or to destroy their enemies. The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by bringing fire and brimstone from the sky which also confirms such an understanding. Therefore, we should interpret all natural disasters as God intended punishment inflicted on the victims. If those who suffered are not enemies of those who were not affected then it must be understood as God's punishment for their sins of idolatry and immorality. And, if we ask how are we to understand the children and infants who were killed in large numbers as sinners and there is a ready made answer to that question also. God has said that God would requite the sins of the parents until the third and the fourth generation, so we must understand the tragedy that hit the children as God's visitation upon them due to God's unabated anger against some of their forbears.

Occasionally, however, the idea of punishment is given up but that all untimely deaths are caused by God is retained. If we ask how to understand the reality that some parents who were taking their children to Church, lost their children while they themselves were spared, we are told that perhaps God wanted those little ones for God's special tasks in heaven! Like a gardener who may take away some flowers to adorn his table, maybe God took those for God's own special use as the bible says "How precious in the sight of God is the death of a saint" (Ps 116:15)? Without any serious discussion we must challenge this particular interpretation. Such an understanding arises from a gross misunderstanding of the text cited. It means exactly the opposite of what is usually believed. As Good News bible rightly translates it, it means that the death of a saint is costly to God and God, as much as the human bereaved, experiences a sense of loss.

The main hurdle in helping to reach a proper decision through systematic reflection is that there is a given mind set. For many people human life on earth is lived in a predetermined world and so that it is God who orders the death of each individual, untimely or in old age, through sickness, or accident or due to any other cause. It is a combination of the twin belief that all death is ordered by



God and that all disastrous phenomena in nature are God's special acts of visitation that gives rise to the explanations mentioned above. These ideas are firmly internalized by most Christians whether or not they belong to mainline denominations or to any of the other churches. These ideas are promoted by independent preachers who stand to gain by keeping people under fear to create a sense of special protection secured through their prayers. They influence Christian people of all denominations. So it is necessary to try and help the Christian people who live under the delusion that their way of understanding is the truth believing that it is derived from God's Word.

It is time that we now returned to our earlier stated method with which we must approach Scripture. We had said, it may be recalled, that a prior understanding of God and God's purposes should govern all interpretations of Scripture. This prior understanding we also said must resonate with what Jesus thought and spoke about God. And thirdly, our understanding of God should be tested against what can be discerned from the way God's love and justice are seeking to manifest themselves in the world of human affairs. We are not rationalists but we do need to utilize the faculty of the intellect fully. Let us now start engaging our people in a dialogue.

We begin by tracing the common ground that exists between us. Both of us are firm believers in God's Sovereignty but we differ in perceiving how God exercises God's sovereign prerogatives. To affirm what God can do is not the same thing as what God does do. We do not deny that God is sovereign, powerful and can choose to punish part or all of creation if it pleases God. However, God declared after the Flood that God will not any more punish humankind using natural calamities (Gen 8:20-22). This decision was taken, we are told, in the full knowledge that human beings would remain sinful. Notwithstanding such a self imposed restriction, there are indeed times when whole nations or cities which provoked God have indeed been destroyed. This is because of their persistent and collective wickedness and total destruction seemed to God to be the only way to prevent the spread of the collective proneness to persist in evil. This was the case with Sodom and Gomorrah. . We should take note, however, that God promised not to destroy the righteous with the wicked, when Abraham pleaded that it does not befit the God of justice to destroy the righteous with the wicked. Lot and his family were saved. If his would be sons in law had heeded his warning they too would have been saved. In the case of Nineveh, on the other hand, it is said that God repented of the decision to destroy the city when they heeded the warning brought to them by Jonah and God did not destroy the city. It is clear that God would not destroy a whole group of people, the good and the bad together. It is also clear that God will warn people before bringing in mass destruction when it becomes necessary to prevent the spread of any evil collectively and persistently indulged in knowing fully well that what they were doing was wicked. God is God of Justice.

In the case of the way God dealt with the Egyptians, first of all we are told that God specially blessed the two Egyptian midwives who refused to abide by Pharaoh's instruction to kill all Hebrew male newborns. The Jewish people even to this day commemorate with gratitude what Siprah and Pua did and also what Pharaoh's daughter did in bringing up Moses. In the Book of Deuteronomy 23:7 Israelites are specifically commanded not to despise Egyptians as they once sojourned in their midst, thereby indicating that God did not approve of hatred against the whole nation of Egypt. So the killing of all first born just on the night of the

Pass Over must have been done because all Egyptians had acquiesced in the xenophobic Genocidal attempt to annihilate the entire new generation of the Israelites. Such complicity came about much later after Moses had fled to Median, had married Zippo rah and had returned to challenge Pharaoh. The event of the Red Sea swallowing the pursuers affected only those Egyptian soldiers who pursued the people of Israel. What they did was wrong and they brought destruction upon themselves. So also in the case of the kings who had besieged Gibeon who had gone to war with the city simply because the Gibeonites had made a deal with Israel to live in peace with them. So although there are the occasions of God's punishment using natural phenomena even after the Flood we see that the good were not destroyed together with the bad.

Another factor that needs to be kept in mind in understanding the stories related to the Exodus and settlement in the land of Palestine is that they are symbolic events and should not be used to interpret all natural calamities which hit people in different parts of the world. They are symbolic in that they demonstrate that God is on the side of the oppressed and so can be taken as a permanent paradigm to encourage all oppressed peoples that God is not on the side of the powerful but God is on the side of the oppressed although the powerful oppressors and tyrants may presume that God is on their side because they keep getting away with their wicked ways. This becomes clear from all the Lament Psalms (e.g. 44 9ff) which look back to the stories of earlier victories and lament that such is no longer their experience. All the lament psalmists, however, affirm their faith in God and pledge to remain steadfast in their commitment to God. This is the proper way to use the stories of miraculous deliverance which attended the Exodus and the settlement in Palestine.

We must now move on to see how Jesus understood and spoke about God. Jesus did warn people about God's Judgment Day and called people to repentance. But on whom did God pronounce judgment? On the stubborn religiosity of contemporary religion which had compromised with the arrogant and tyrannical power of Rome, had endorsed a lot of evil in the name of God, had nurtured exclusivist tendencies, seemed set to prevent people from being kind and human to one another and above all had interpreted the ministry of healing of Jesus as stemming from the devil...This judgment which Jesus warned about was to take place in the end. In the day to day affairs until that awful day, God was dealing mercifully with all, the good and the bad. God made the sun to rise on the just and the unjust and brought rain also on the just and the unjust. In other words God remained faithful to the Covenant God made with humankind after the Flood. God's concern and providential care, in fact, extended to the whole of creation. God cared even for insignificant numerous and small creatures like sparrows which in human reckoning were cheap and dispensable. Accidents such as the fall of the tower of Siloam and instances of arrogant state terrorism such as the killing of the Galileans in the Temple (see Lk 13:1-5) did succeed in flouting God's concern to protect and save life. But such events, most definitely, are not God's doing. Jesus said that those killed were no worse sinners than the rest of the dwellers of Jerusalem. God's judgment, when it does happen, would spare no wicked and God does not act capriciously inflicting pain on some and excusing the others when all alike are sinners. Often those who escape are much worse sinners! As real as Judgment in the End would be, God's perfect mercy upon every human person and over all of nature in the present was the reality Now. Therefore, all life style and ethical implications for personal and for societal/national life were to be ordered in the light



of God's absolute goodness and non-deferential providence. This was most emphatically the concern of Jesus.

Calamities and willful acts of destruction and massacres do happen in the present day. They are not to be interpreted as Acts of God.

If as already conceded Dooms Day was going to be a reality could not events like the recent Tsunami destruction, many earthquakes and tidal waves of recent times be seen as portents of the coming Dooms Day for the whole universe? Did not Jesus himself say that there will be famines and earthquakes indicating the beginning of the birth pangs? Jesus also said "Do not be alarmed, the end is not yet" and that "Of that day and hour no one knows...nor the Son". In accordance with Jesus' own admission of his ignorance the end which was expected to come before the contemporary generation of Jesus passed away it did not happen. Paul who also believed the Coming of Christ to happen in his own life time later seemed to have modified his beliefs. By the time he comes to write Ephesians and Colossians he had started talking of the hidden mystery now revealed namely that the whole of creation would be consummated in Christ and that the Church was to participate together with God in bringing about that consummation.

4. God and Nature

We must now move on to seek an understanding of the way in which God has chosen to relate to Nature. We must begin with the story of creation. It is stated clearly that God, after creating humankind comprising women and men entrusted care of creation to humankind. In other words there was a willing self abdication on the part of God. God did not take God's hands off completely. But God chose to respect human freedom and is waiting patiently that one day humankind would learn to exercise its stewardship over nature with a greater sense of responsibility.

The other factor we need to remember is that, as it comes out in the conversation between God and Job, God also has vested nature with a certain amount of autonomy. In Job 38:11 there is also a hint that Nature has its own inherent arrogance which becomes obvious in instances when the sea exceeds its bounds.

Even if scientifically we find it difficult to accept Nature as having a will of its own, we need to accept two things: 1. Abusive and exploitative plundering of nature to sustain the lives of the rich and the powerful at insatiable levels of comfort and luxury does upset the eco systems with disastrous consequences: a) The survival of many species is endangered. b) It results in phenomena like the puncturing of the ozone layer of the atmosphere. c) It causes acid rain to fall on the earth. d) It gives rise to global warming causing a rise in sea levels increasing the frequency and intensity of tidal waves. e) Some eco-sensitive scientists expressed anxiety that the underground testing of an atomic device in Pokran in the desert region of Rajasthan of India may have exerted pressure on the already existing fault line in the inner strata and may have triggered the powerful earthquake of Gujarat in the year 2002. 2. The second factor is that this earth is not perfect. It does have fault lines as already mentioned above in its lower strata, deserts and drought prone areas on its surface; its resource distribution is not equitable... But the earth of all planets is the only one, as far as we can tell, capable of creating and sustaining life. Somehow its 'inherent imperfections' seem to be a necessity for creating and sustaining life! God has ordered regularity of seasons but that regularity can be breached by wrong collocation of forces within nature itself or by human abuse and manipulation. So we must conclude that somehow the phenomenon of global warming caused

by collective human plundering of natural resources, the possible pressures exerted on the tectonic plates under the ocean due to underground testing of atomic weapons and the quirk of a clash between the unstable inner strata have combined together to produce the Tsunami disaster affecting mostly innocent people. The fact that the average per decade of Tsunamis in the Pacific has increased during the last two decades also seems to point in the same direction. It is by no means God's vindictive act of punishment or God's act to bring a general warning.

Aberrant as Nature can be, however, it does not seem to be totally unkind either! For we also learn from the experience of inexplicable premonitions of primitive people, intuitive movements of fish, animals and insect-life forms that Nature has a built-in mechanism of sending warning signals about the build up of forces which might cause a disaster. Observers have stated that except for dogs and a few other domestic animals like cattle and goats wild deer and many other forms of wild life in the Tsunami hit areas seemed to have been able to flee to safety. No carcasses of any wild life have been found! People like the Australian Aborigines and Native Americans do claim that they can empathize intuitively with Nature when Nature itself is experiencing some internal disturbance. On the one hand we now live in the time of technological advance which can invent instruments of detection and warning but on the other hand we also live in the Post-Modern age when there is greater openness to listen to the experience of people belonging to the so called primitive cultures and to learn from the intuitive capacities of the non-intelligent animal life. Admittedly creation is imperfect and does have faults. But God has created Life with the capacity to come to terms with the potentiality of Nature's aberrant behavior from time to time! God therefore should not be blamed for our ignorance and neglect.

5. How do we Envision God in Relation to the Victims and the Bereft Survivors?

If God is just and merciful, how do we see God in relation to those who have been the victims of the disaster? God has undergone a self abdication and has handed over stewardship of Nature to humankind. God also respects the autonomy and integrity of natural forces. But God is by no means absent or is only a distant observer. God is God Immanuel. God therefore should be understood and experienced as one who is a fellow-sufferer-enabler. God is the I Am who was with the people of Israel during their suffering under the yoke of slavery for four hundred years and when they faced annihilation. It is only because God Pua and Silpa the two midwives were inspired and empowered to defy Pharaoh. It was God who encouraged the daughter of Pharaoh and perhaps many other Egyptian mothers to adopt the abandoned Egyptian male infants. Thus Moses himself was saved and given a privileged upbringing equipping him for leadership. This is what God revealed to Moses through the symbol of the Burning Bush which was not consumed. The bush symbolically represented suffering Israel and God called Moses from out of it. God walked with Shadrach, Meshach and Abed Nego in the fiery furnace giving them first relative freedom from bondage before bringing them out of fire. This story was fondly remembered during the persecution suffered under Antiochus some three hundred years later as depicting their own experience.

We referred earlier to the faith affirmations of the Psalmists of the Psalms of Lament. The Psalmists who feel derelict always also are also able to reaffirm their faith. It is no empty talk, therefore, to say that people who are severely traumatized can and do to experience God as a Fellow

Suffering and Enabling God. This is now borne out through a few stories that are being shared by those who went to sit and listen to stories of the bereaved survivors of the Tsunami disaster.

Teams of counselors who concentrate in helping children spend time playing with them and by encouraging them to reflect on their experience by drawing pictures. A boy, ten years old, drew the picture of an elderly man shedding tears. When asked whether he was depicting the father whom he had lost it seems he said that he had drawn the picture of God who stood by and was shedding tears. God continues to reveal to children what we fail to see because of our preconceived notions of God.

Another story is a success story in the midst of many tragic ones. Sudhakar is a theological student of the Theological College of Lanka, Pilimattalawa and is the son of a pastor in Batticaloa district. Sunday worship had just concluded. The pastor father had gone out into the town looking for two children of the church run orphanage. Meantime the first wave which was not so strong came but receded quickly and the mother went out anxiously looking for the husband and the little ones. Sudhakar's sister followed the mother. Sudakar was watching the sudden incursion and recession of the sea. They thought the waves had receded and then came the monstrous second wave and swept away the mother and the sister. Sudhakar held on to a lean and wobbly post. Somehow the mother and the sister were stopped by a thorny bush a little further down but were about to be drowned. This wave started receding and Sudhakar was able to drag the mother out and saw his sister lying well under water almost at the same spot. He carried her as she had become unconscious and had also broken her leg. He helped the mother to walk towards the shore while carrying his sister on the shoulder. As many as 80 people of the Church, however, got washed away except for his family who got 'miraculously' saved, because a thorny bush stopped the mother and sister and because God gave courage to Sudakar and the wave in any case had started receding. I had the privilege of meeting this family. They do not revel in the fact that they had been saved when the entire congregation have been swept away. The pastor father has gone back to help the bereaved relatives, to bury the dead and do whatever else that needs to be done. One other student who belonged to the same congregation lost his mother and two sisters. He himself was not affected because he had gone to help in the worship service of another Church well inland. Did God help Sudhakar in an arbitrary and selective manner? The enabling power of God was able to be accessed by Sudhakar only because of the chancy presence of the lean and wobbly support and the thorny bush which prevented the mother and the sister being drawn further into the sea. God who cares for all could not do much else to save others.

We have also heard of others who saw their loved ones being swept away while they themselves were able to hold on to some support close by. One such person is a senior pastor an old student of TTS, the Rev. Kadiresan Pillai. We hear that he is suffering from a severe sense of guilt for saving himself and not being able to help his aged mother-in-law being swept away. There are mothers who suffer guilt because they could not hold on to their child because with all their strength they held on to their support.

The one success story, therefore should not be seen as in any way a story of God's special favor to Sudhakar's family. They too are conscious of this and are doing all their best to help the others who have not been so fortunate. The empowering presence of God is to be located in this

spiritual strength much more than even in the courage and the timely action of Sudhakar. Why we need to say this is one independent preacher it seems sought an interview with CNN and had said that he and some others in a boat were saved miraculously as he was able to command the waves to be still and they obeyed. He has boldly made up a story ignoring the fact that another pastor of another independent church stopped the people from fleeing to safety and exhorted them to pray saying that the waves would not harm them. Alas all of them including the pastor got washed away. So if the story of the one who commanded the waves is true we have a god who is arbitrary and capricious, not one who loves all and cares for all. There is no use serving such a god. But we do know that the Parent God of our Lord Jesus is not like that and therefore we must hold stories of the many tragedies and a few stories of apparent miraculous deliverance as both belonging to the realm of chance. God's power available to the bereaved and the saved is of the same kind as that was available to those who escaped. It belongs to the realm of spirituality.

So we emphatically affirm God's presence with those who had lost their dear ones and their homes and possessions. We see the presence and inspirational power of God active in many instances. It is only because God has still preserved a certain amount of humanness in this exploitative and selfish world, that so much of human sympathy has been evoked and aid to bring immediate relief, to rebuild devastated homes and schools, repair damaged boats and rehabilitate the displaced... flows in large measure. Many have rushed to the scenes of disaster to help to bury the decomposed bodies of the dead and to clear rubble. God's presence with the suffering people is also concretized through many counselors who risking their own sanity and peace of mind have chosen to be with people to help them through their trauma. While human wickedness is as active as ever in trying to cheat the suffering people out of their due measure of relief, in abusing helpless women in the camps sexually, in trying to traffic in lone child survivors... human goodness transcending traditional animosities and prejudices is also to the fore. Many people see a sign of hope that this might herald a new beginning of inter ethnic amity in this strife torn "Paradise Island"!

But what about the innocent dead? How do we see their tragic end in the light of the Gospel. They were not taken away by God with any selfish intent. Their suffering we could say must be seen as contributing to the pool of redemption along with Christ's own death. God turned that terrible tragedy into a source of an ever bubbling spring of redemptive power to bring back sanity and humanity to all the humans. Perhaps the time has come for all of us to give up our thinking that the killing of Jesus was pulled off by God in order that it might be reckoned as a vicarious punishment so that we the guilty may be let off the hook. Jesus spoke of himself as the Son of Man. The best way to understand that self designation is that he was the corporate all time representative of the entire Collective of those who suffer unjustly, one way or the other. Paul is beginning to grope in this direction when he sees his own sufferings as completing that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. The way the Fourth Gospel sees the I Am in the lifted up Son of Man also seems to suggest that in the Cross of Christ the sufferings of all those who suffer unjustly are gathered up. The Church undergoing severe persecution saw Christ as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Soon after Tsunami the Presiding Minister of the United Church of Christ in the US, Dr John Thomas sent a letter to the Churches in the Tsunami



affected countries. In that letter he very helpfully points out that Epiphany was accompanied by the slaughter of the Innocents which provoked the wailing of the mothers. True Epiphany depends on Christ's people bearing the brunt of daring the powers of evil. The two are inevitably bound up.

His death i.e. the death of the Son of Man, therefore, together with all those who suffered unjustly, in a mysterious way, paves the way for repentance of all of us. The collective repentance arising out of a true sense of the guilt of abetting powers of evil makes it possible for God to release new energy leading to the re-creation of Humanity in the image of the perfect goodness of God's own self. In this specific instance the repentance required is the repentance of the powerful and privileged sections of humankind who abuse and plunder nature and even perhaps try to manipulate nature which result in disasters that hurt the poor and the vulnerable sections of humankind elsewhere. Such is the reality of human corporateness. The Risen Lord is with us. Just as he acted to redress the loss of Lazarus, we need to do all we can to bring consolation and hope to the deeply saddened bereaved. We are told that Job got all his possessions back because friends and relatives brought gifts. Maybe those who lost their children will be given new children or they would be able to adopt the children who have survived but have lost their parents. Let us do all we can.

Dr. Dhyanchand Carr
Jaffna Diocese
Sri Lanka

Aggressive Theodicy

Aaron Armitage

The Arts and Letters Daily seems to have decided the tsunami is the perfect opportunity to attack religion. Most recently, it's linked here, which quotes an earlier ALD article lead:

If God is God, he's not good. If God is good, he's not God. You can't have it both ways, especially after the Indian Ocean catastrophe.

As far as I can see, the definition of "good" here is making sure everything is always to our liking and nothing bad happens to people. The possibility that it could simply involve, at a minimum, the prevention of the worst harms in untenable, because "the worst" is relative. So far we have not had civilization-ending asteroid impacts -- and we get people insulting His character because of tsunamis. If the worst that could happen to you was a broken bone, people would still ponder how a good God could let such a thing happen -- even with the huge amount of supernatural intervention in our favor that supposes.

Any world with plate tectonics will have earthquakes, and any world with both plate tectonics and oceans will have earthquakes that cause tsunamis. But why did God will that the world contain those things? It doesn't matter. Any set of physical laws and any configuration for the Earth would necessarily occasionally produce effects that are harmful to whichever humans happen to be in the way. Questioning God because of "natural evil" is questioning why He did not make humanity inside a special bubble where things are artificially nice because it's always out of the way.

But He did make humanity inside such a bubble: the Garden of Eden. The transgression of Adam was, among

other things, a monstrous ingratitude. God, being good, hates ingratitude, and so He expelled our ancestors from their special bubble. Exile from the Garden is a perpetual risk of being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

God could have put Eden on Mars, and then exile would have meant immediate death. He could have made things slightly different so that the Earth was much hotter or much colder. He did not; by and large, life on the Earth is an amazingly pleasant experience. But that's not good enough. They want to still be in the Garden itself. And rightly so: we're supposed to desire unlimited good, and the fact that we do is even a proof of the Christian religion. But we don't have it, either the perfect joy we really want or many of the imperfect substitutes we think we want. And here's where it hurts: it's our own fault. We don't deserve it. There are two reactions to this. You can insist that we really do deserve better, which is what the critics here do, or perhaps can make ourselves deserve better by moral effort. Or you can say, "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

Apart from God's grace, no one will ever take the second option. We'd rather stand on our own merits. Because of pride. And we'd rather God honor our pride by acting like what we think of as our merits are worth something. When they say an omnipotent God cannot be good as they define good, they are denying that God is good for the very reason that He is good and they would rather He be an accomplice of evil and lie can call it good. He had every right to cast the human race into Hell. Nobody has room to complain when he doesn't fiddle with the laws of nature on our behalf.

Someone might answer that I'm writing all this sitting comfortably in my living room in my intact house with my nice, warm, dry bed upstairs waiting for me whenever I feel like sleeping. If you knew how I react when the laws of nature get in my way in relatively trivial ways, like when my car breaks down, you might call me a hypocrite. But, first, that doesn't mean I'm wrong. Second, nothing I've written is or should be taken as commentary on the victims in particular. Jesus ruled that sort of thinking out in Luke 13:4. Unlike Job's friends I'm not addressing a victim, but fools who are equally as comfortable as myself yet feel they have the right to complain about God.

UPDATE: I'd like to thank Post Tenebras Lux for his generous comments. He mentions the theodicy of moral evil, which I didn't, based on the "Free Will Defense". (Which doesn't necessarily contradict Reformed doctrine of the will; also see this of mine.) What I'm attempting is a free will theodicy of "natural evil". It's different from most, though, because I don't think tsunamis are a result of the Fall, just the fact that humans get in the way of them. The reason I call it aggressive is that I deny it's a problem at all. It's just for us to be outside the Garden, because otherwise evil would have been rewarded.

Thursday, January 06, 2005

<http://calvinist-libertarians.blogspot.com/2005/01/aggressive-theodicy-arts-and-letters.html>

Finding God in the Tsunami

Dane Shelly

January 2005

It's a familiar question with many variations. Where is God when it hurts? Why do bad things happen to good people? Is this the best of all possible worlds? As millions of people in Asia attempt to rebuild their homes after the tsunami,



people the world over wonder why a good God can permit such evil. It's a fair question without an easy answer.

In 1755, an earthquake off the shore of Lisbon birthed a tsunami that killed over 60,000 people. The French philosophe Voltaire quickly challenged the prevailing theodicy - a view that is embodied by Pangloss (this is the best of all possible worlds) in his *Candide*. Why, he wondered, did God permit such indiscriminate suffering? There seem to be a few options, none of them appealing: either God cannot prevent such death (so he is not all-powerful), or he is unwilling to prevent such death (so he is not all good), or suffering is part of his master plan (so he doesn't care), or there is no God at all. When faced with these options, it is little wonder that many people lose faith in God.

The problem of evil has long vexed Christian theologians. In the Brothers Karamazov, Ivan's rebellion against the world as God made it is perhaps history's most eloquent denunciation of the Almighty. Ivan insists that he cannot accept salvation from a God who wants to be worshipped so badly that he permits the suffering of children. Christianity has a few responses to Ivan's rebellion.

The one held by most Christians is a Cliff Notes version of Augustine's view: God is the ultimate cause of every event, so there must be a divine purpose behind every tragedy. Most Christians don't even realize they believe this, but the evidence is when Christians say things like, "It's all part of God's plan" and "God works in mysterious ways" in response to someone dying of cancer or thousands dying in a tsunami. In other words, God caused this evil (although for the purpose of a greater good). This view, I believe, is both wrong and dangerous. It is dangerous because the logical conclusion one must hold is that God willed the death of all those people in the tsunami, just like he willed that nearly a million people would be massacred in Rwanda. It is also dangerous because of the emotional harm it causes to people who are suffering. When your only response to tragedy is to repeat trite cliches about God's mysterious ways, it is little wonder that people get angry at God, and eventually lose faith.

But there is another option for those who want to believe in a good God who cannot will needless suffering. In this view, God is never the cause of evil. Instead, the suffering of the world is the unavoidable by-product of God's greatest gift to humanity: freedom to love. Because love is not real unless it is freely given, and because God wants to love and be loved, he gives us almost complete freedom in our lives. Human freedom, then, and not God, is the final cause of evil in the world. Humans have the freedom to invent cars, which creates the possibility of car accidents. And so forth.

Ah, but a clever reader will observe, we are right back at Ivan's rebellion. Indeed. The truth is, there is no satisfactory explanation for earthquakes. According to a famous dictum of chaos theory, a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the world can cause a tsunami on the other side. Think Run Lola Run on a cosmic scale. In other words, it is almost impossible to divine the cause of events in our world. But importantly, we don't have to blame God for them.

One Christian theologian has said that the problem of evil doesn't really bother him, the real mystery is the problem of good. Why did millions of people around the world give money to people they had never met?

People all over the world, from every religion, race, and culture, raced to those in need and gave for no other reason than sympathy - and dare I say it - love. While

many people will point to the deaths caused by the tsunami as evidence of a malicious God (or a meaningless universe), I see in the kindness of strangers a glimpse of the divine.

<http://www.thewissahickon.com/issues/january%2005/findi ng%20god.html>

A Humanist Response to the Tsunami Disaster

Les Reid

<http://www.humanists.net/belfast/tsunami.htm>

(published in *The Irish News*, 13 January 2005)

The thousands of deaths and the terrible destruction caused by the tsunami have provoked two responses. One is a tremendous upsurge of sympathy and solidarity with the victims and survivors of this natural disaster, manifesting itself in the millions of pounds of charity donated, the tons of food delivered and the arrival of aid workers from many parts of the world. That response has been inspiring and reassuring, giving us evidence of the great bonds of sympathy which join us all in one common humanity.

The other response has been more troubled, as religious believers have struggled to make sense of God's role in those scenes of death, destruction and suffering. "Where was God in the tsunami?" It is a natural question to ask. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, loving and kind, then one would expect Him to do something to avert the disaster. God, we are told, is Our Father, yet any parent who knowingly allowed preventable injury to befall his/her children and made no effort to save them, would be guilty of criminal neglect. So believers are tortured by doubt and feel that their God has failed them.

Confronted with this theological challenge, religious leaders have tried to pacify their followers in different ways. 'It is a punishment for sin'. 'God moves in mysterious ways'. 'We must follow Jesus and show compassion'. 'Doubt should not be allowed to undermine faith'. And so on. Different brands of religion have adopted different strategies, but they all end up struggling to square the circle of God's power and love failing the victims of the tsunami.

Why struggle to untie a tangled theological knot when you can cut right through it with the sword of reason? As a Humanist, my answer to the question, "Where was God in the tsunami?" is short and simple: He was nowhere. He did not act to save thousands of lives because he does not exist. You might as well ask why Jupiter did not intervene to save the inhabitants of Pompeii when Etna erupted in 75 AD. There is no spirit in charge of the universe. The traditional stories told by various religions of spirits in the sky, life after death, miracles and divine interventions, etc., are merely fictions: wish-fulfilling stories which helped people to live with the things they could not explain. Such fictions held the tribe together and gave it a sense of common purpose and identity.

The facts of our place in the universe are much less cosy than the religious stories, but they assert our common humanity, instead of dividing us into competing, and sometimes even warring, religious tribes. Yes, we have no life after death, which is a hard, unpitiful fact, but it is true for all of us. That fact provides each of us with the bedrock on which our sympathy for others is founded. Likewise, all our ideas of morality and social organisation should be based on the facts of our common humanity. Just as we



have devised the Highway Code to enable us all to use the roads easily and fairly, so our moral and legal codes should ensure that we can all benefit from living together in society. Of course, we do not always agree what the rules should be, but that is why we must have open discussion and free and democratic political structures, so we can establish rules and revise them later, if need be.

The challenge facing our society now is to make the transition from a culture based on religion to a culture based on rational beliefs. The minority of the population who do not hold religious beliefs is increasing every year, but most of them have never heard of Humanism. Social inertia ensures that education and the media continue to promote religion, even as its intellectual foundations are collapsing under it. It is a tragedy of our time that our schools, broadcasters and newspapers do so little to help people who have abandoned their religion to find Humanism. Humanism is a coherent philosophy which asserts that people can live happy, moral and productive lives without religion. Instead of the dubious comforts of heavens, hells, ghosts and goblins, it offers the plain, wholesome fare of One Life, One Earth, One Humanity. In face of the disaster of the tsunami, human solidarity is all we have, but it is enough.

A Pastoral Theology of Tragedy

Tom Ascol

Founders Journal · Fall 2003 · pp. 1-12

<http://www.founders.org/FJ54/editorial.html>

September 11, 2001 has in many ways defined our modern era. So much of our thinking is now in reference to the acts of terror perpetrated against the United States on that day. In the immediate aftermath, multitudes gathered to pray in churches across the land. People who had neglected spiritual concerns suddenly became spiritually sensitized. Everyone began to have opinions about God and concerns about God and wanting to hear from Him. There was no shortage of those who began to speak for God.

Tragedy presents unusual opportunities—for both good and ill. The potential for good arises from the fact that people are awakened to realities that they would otherwise ignore. C. S. Lewis famously made this point in his observation that “God whispers to us in pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” [1] This is profoundly true. Once the world is awakened by tragedy and attention is drawn away from those trivialities that blind people to God a pivotal opportunity emerges. But there is no guarantee that it will automatically be redeemed. Someone must rise to speak God’s truth into the pain and suffering.

Those of us who are called to the work of pastoral ministry in the church bear the greatest responsibility for doing so. Shepherds of God’s flock must be willing to seize such opportunities and do our very best to point people in paths of truth and righteousness in the wake of tragedy. We must help people understand what God is saying in the midst of sorrow and suffering. There is great opportunity for tremendous good to be done for the kingdom of God when tragedy strikes.

But there is also tremendous opportunity for spiritual damage to be done—damage that arises out of misunderstanding or misrepresentation of God. This can

happen even when intentions are good and motivations are proper. Unhelpful commentaries were abundant in the wake of September 11.

One well-known Baptist pastor wrote an editorial that was picked up by several media outlets. In it he stated, “You may hear misguided minds say ‘this must have been God’s will.’ Nonsense. In a world of free choices, God’s will is rarely done! Doing our own will is much more common. Don’t blame God for this tragedy. Blame people who ignored what God has told us to do: love your neighbor as yourself.”

This pastor rightly placed moral blame where it belongs, namely on the terrorists and their supporters. They were sinful and their actions were clearly evil. He further tried to guard very carefully the reputation of God as One who is not the author of evil. That is also appropriate. But in his effort to separate God from evil results in a cure that is ultimately worse than the disease that he is trying to address. His overly simplistic view of God’s will inhibits serious Bible reading because, as I explain below, Scripture refers to God’s will as being in some sense inviolable as well as in some sense breakable.

The unwillingness or inability to reconcile God’s absolute sovereignty with man’s absolute responsibility betrays a greater affinity to rationalism than Biblicism. The Bible certainly affirms both. If we are going to be students of the Word and ministers of the Word, then we must be willing to submit our thinking to Scripture and refuse to deny whatever the Bible teaches.

Theology Prepares Us for Tragedies

A cogent pastoral theology equips one to speak for God in a redemptive way when the inevitable difficulties of life occur. A theology of tragedy helps prepare people in advance to face difficulty with hope and encouragement. The Scripture instructs pastors to do precisely that—to help our people anticipate and prepare for tragedies that will come in their lives.

Two texts that teach us to think this way are John 16:33 and Ephesians 6:13. The former comes from the end of our Lord’s discourse in the upper room before His high priestly prayer on the night He was betrayed. Jesus concluded His message by saying, “These things I have spoken to you that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

In this world, you will have tribulation. That is one promise that no one ever likes to claim. But it is a promise of the Lord. Tragedies will come. But even when they do, Jesus wants His followers to have peace and good cheer. How? By paying attention to “these things,” that is, the truths that He has just taught.

Study through John 13–16 and you will find our Lord teaching on important theological subjects. He speaks of His death and resurrection and of the coming of the Holy Spirit. He talks about the necessity of living in vital union with Him and submitting to His Word. He addresses His oneness with the Father and the unconditional election of His people. There is no shortage of doctrinal content in those chapters and it is that content that He has in mind when He refers to “these things.” Jesus taught His disciples doctrine so that they might have peace in a world which He knew was going to be filled with tribulation.

Our Lord is a model for pastors at this point. It is imperative that those who shepherd the church of God not wait for devastating trials to come before developing a



theology of tragedy. We must prepare ourselves and our people for the inevitable difficulties of life. How? By heeding, meditating on, teaching and applying sound doctrine.

Paul does this in Ephesians 6:13, "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." The apostle is addressing the issue of spiritual warfare. He has introduced the subject in verse 10 after spending the previous 21 verses addressing the key relationships in life.

Commentaries often miss the connection between Ephesians 5:22–6:9 and 6:10–20. I am convinced that what Paul is doing in the earlier verses is marking out the battlefield for the spiritual warfare that he describes in the latter verses. The most significant dimensions of spiritual warfare don't take place in some exorcist's chamber or demonically infested neighborhood (as is commonly thought today). Rather, the bloodiest theatres of spiritual warfare are the kitchen table, the den, the classroom, the bedroom, the office and job site.

After he has marked out the battlefield Paul then brings to light the deadly nature of the conflict. Beginning in 6:10 he reminds us of the reality of the devil and all the demonic determination to undo the work of God in the lives of God's people.

Because believers are in this spiritual war on a daily basis, we need to take up daily the whole armor of God. This is necessary so that, "having done all we may be able to stand" (13). Specifically, that we might be able to stand "in the evil day." Now some take that reference to the "evil day" to be simply a generic reference to life after the fall. That may be. But more likely he is referring to particularly trying times, "perilous times," as he calls them in 2 Timothy 2:1. These would be seasons of unusual outbreak of evil. Such times will come and in order to be prepared for them and to keep standing through them, believers need to take up the whole armor of God.

In verses 14-18 Paul explains his meaning and it is immediately obvious that the armor he has in mind can only be identified theologically. Truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, Scripture and prayer—these are the armament that will enable the Christian to withstand in the evil day.

So like his Lord before him, Paul instructs believers to prepare for tragedies by becoming theologically equipped. And it is every pastor's job to help prepare his people in the same way. Like the ant in Proverbs, when it is summer, we ought to be storing up, knowing that winter is coming. Jesus promised, "In this world you will have tribulation." Tragedies will come both personally and in larger contexts of family and friendships. They will also come nationally and, as the efficiency of communication continues to increase, even globally. The present is always the proper time to prepare for them.

Let me offer a few suggestions for developing a pastoral theology of tragedy. What I am talking about is learning to think of tragedies theologically. This should just be a subset of thinking about all of life theologically. In order to live life to the fullest we must live coram Deo, conscious that we are always under God's gaze. He is the one who has made us and is providentially ordering our lives. He has a purpose and a kingdom that is being advanced in the world. As His redeemed children, we need to see everything in life through these lenses.

Exegesis

Specifically, to develop a theology of tragedy we must first give careful attention to exegesis. Study those didactic passages that directly address the issues of trial and suffering. If you start with the book of Psalms you will be more than introduced to the inspired thinking of God's people regarding trials and tragedies. But there are many clear passages in the New Testament as well.

Consider Romans 5:1–4:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Notice how Paul links justification with tribulation and trials. Confident of possessing peace with God and standing in grace the believer can rejoice in the hope of God's glory. "And not only that," the Christian can also glory in tribulations. Why? Because he knows that they will ultimately serve for his spiritual growth and cannot diminish in the least his acceptance with God. This confidence is his because of the Lord Jesus Christ whom he is depending on by faith.

A similar type of reasoning is in the apostle's mind in Romans 8, especially beginning in verse 16. This section is filled with insight on suffering and trial. "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." What in the world is the apostle talking about? From the personal dimension to the cosmic dimension, he goes on to speak of how everything in creation is anticipating the great day of redemption because the whole created order has been kept captive through the damage of the fall.

What is it that the apostle is seeing? What is it that he wants his readers to see about tragedy and suffering when he says that it is not worth comparing with what awaits us? In thinking through trials and tragedies we need to linger over such texts with this prayer on our hearts: "O, Lord, show me what you showed Paul! Teach me to see and believe what he saw so that I can honestly say what he said—that my present suffering is not even worth mentioning when compared to the glory that awaits me in heaven." Such praying will prevent our exegesis from being superficial or merely academic.

Philippians 1:29 is another verse that should be given attention. "For you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake." God has "granted it" to us to suffer? Suffering is a gift? That is exactly what this verse says. If suffering is a gift, then the means of suffering whereby God gives that gift need to be seen for what they are. It is not true that they "have nothing to do with God's will," but rather they are the outworking of God's will in giving us the gift of suffering. Pastors need to meditate on this and to teach their people to think deeply about suffering as a gift from God.

There is no shortage of passages that provide direct instruction about Christian suffering. Philippians 3:7–11, Colossians 1:24, 1 Peter 4:12–19, Hebrews 10:32–39 and Matthew 5:11–12 are some of the key ones that should not be overlooked.

I preached from Luke 13:1–4 the Sunday after 9/11:

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do



you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem?"

This passage is filled with insight on how to respond to and evaluate tragedies. It considers trials that arise both from human malice (as with Pilate and the people that he murdered) and from natural disasters (as with the tower fell). Jesus does not say many of the things that we might have anticipated, but what He does say is very instructive regarding how we ought to view such things and prepare for them before they arise. Tragedies, He indicates are like warning shots fired across the bow of the unrepentant's ship. They are a call to repentance.

Case Studies

Along with exegesis of key passages, I also suggest a careful study of biblical examples of tragedy. How have God's people handled tragedy in different situations? The Bible is filled with these kinds of stories. Hebrews 11 is a great place to start. Along with the better known heroes of faith mentioned in that chapter (Abraham, Joseph and Moses) the last verses include people whose experiences do not look very victorious. They were tortured, mocked, chained, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, killed with the sword, tormented, destitute, and forced to live in deserts and caves. Yet the writer says of them, "of whom the world was not worthy" (38) and says that they "obtained a good testimony through faith" (39). We should study their examples and pay particular attention to the exercise of their faith through trials.

Joseph is a classic example of one who suffered well in the Old Testament. Tragedy invaded his life but he saw at the end of the story that God was behind it all. Joseph did not simply confess that God somehow worked his trials into an overarching purpose that had been planned all along. Rather, he confessed that God really actually did it and He did it in order to bring about great good (Genesis 50:20; cf. 45:8). He had a theological understanding of God's ways with His people.

Job's proverbial story teaches the same lesson—that God uses tragedies to accomplish His good and wise purposes in the lives of His people. The book of Job is a great help in drawing together key doctrines that must inform our thinking about human suffering. From our insider perspective we see things that Job could not see as he was going through them. From the beginning we know what God was doing, but Job did not know. We know about the discussion between God and the devil and how God granted him specific permission to disrupt Job's life. But Job knew none of this. He is going about his life as he always had when suddenly, through both natural disaster and moral evil his life is devastated.

Job did not deserve to suffer in this way. It was innocent suffering. I do not mean that he was sinless. Rather, I am pointing out that he did not do anything to deserve this. He did not get cancer because he smoked or he did not get AIDS because he was promiscuous. He was seeking to live the way he knew to live and these tragedies came to him despite his best efforts to honor God.

His story confronts us with the questions that always arise in the wake of tragedy: "How can we trust God? Where was He? What are we to make of God?"

It is interesting to see how this line of questioning is addressed in the book of Job. Job of course confesses that

the "Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord," and he humbles himself in sackcloth and ashes. His first three friends show up and for seven days do a great thing by keeping their mouths shut. They are just with him. Here is a vital lesson for pastoral ministry—knowing when to speak and when not to speak. Most of the time in the immediate aftermath of tragedy it is better to say too little than too much.

Job's three friends did well until they opened their mouths. When they did speak they revealed a very trite understanding of God and evil. Their theology was neatly wrapped up but it turned out to be patently false. They offered simplistic answers with a condemning spirit. Their thinking is summarized in Eliphaz's comments in chapter 4:7-9:

Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright ever cut off? Even as I have seen, Those who plow iniquity And sow trouble reap the same. By the blast of God they perish, And by the breath of His anger they are consumed.

He speaks for all of them that God brings good to the righteous and suffering to the unrighteous. Such was their theology.

This is a classic example of what not to say to a suffering person. Does God bring judgments on people for their sins? Yes, He does. Is all tragedy the result of sin? Yes, in the general sense that we live in a fallen world and there were no tragedies before sin. But it is dangerous at best to reason from that generality to any specific case. To do so with infallible certainty is foolish and to do so in the immediate wake of suffering is heartless.

Job responds to this with some very hard questions of God and tried to justify himself in ways that are not admirable. But the real point of the story begins to unfold in chapter 38 when God starts questioning Job. The Lord's questions explode like theological cluster bombs on Job's thinking. "Where were you?" "Who are you?" Job is humbled to the dust.

These rhetorical questions have their intended effect by bringing him to a deeper, healthier knowledge of God. Out of that deepened understanding Job says in chapter 42, "I have not known anything." He learned that God alone is sovereign and blameless in all His ways.

In response to the question, "can we trust God?" Job's wife says, "no, you cannot trust God. Curse him and die." That is the way many people feel in the wake of tragedy. "If this is what God is like, I want nothing to do with him. Why in the world would you trust a God that would allow this to happen to you?"

Job's friends answered the question with a qualified "yes." "Yes, you can trust God if you will start dealing honestly and directly with your problem and just buy into a cheap theology that says, 'God always blesses those who try to do right and He always judges those that do not try to do right.' So if you will admit that your suffering is a specific judgment of your specific sin, then you may trust God to bless you when you do good and give you trials only when you do not do good."

But Job comes to a completely different answer. As he contemplates the question of God's trustworthiness he concludes, "Yes, though I do not know where to find God at times, and though it seems at times that He is my enemy, He can be trusted in the face of inexplicable pain and suffering—especially, when you see Him for who He is and



come to understand that you do not know nearly as much as you thought you knew."

Can God be trusted in times of tragedy? Yes, particularly if you refuse to make the mistake of misrepresenting what faith looks like in times of tragedy. This is an important point for developing a theology that would be helpful in tragedy.

What does faith look like in the midst of horrific suffering and confusion? It is not the happy-go-lucky, glib kind of superficial expressions that we often see on the cover of glossy magazines and TBN. It is patently not that. Nor is it merely the positive mental attitude that many commend in the name of Christ. Faith, real faith, is built on certainties. And because of that, it is able to live with mysteries. It rests confidently on what it knows and waits humbly on God when confused by what it cannot understand. And sometimes that humble waiting upon God does not look very strong and it does not look very victorious. But it can be a rugged determination that refuses to curse God when some of your closest relations are saying to you, "curse God and die." I like the way that John Piper put it. Sometimes true faith is nothing more than an "uncursing hope in an unfelt God."

That is what Job had. This is also what we see in Jesus on the cross. "My God, my God, what have you forsaken me?" That was a real cry of discouragement and concern. But it was a cry to "My God." He was crying out to God. It is a cry of faith, faith that does not look very victorious, faith that could be held up to ridicule by some who think that faith should always appear glitzy and with a broad smile. Job is a wonderful example of this but even more so is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Systematic Theology

A third suggestion concerns the work of systematic theology. There is no substitute for it. The longer I stay in the pastorate the more I recognize how relevant systematic theology is to ministry. Do not let anyone ever convince you that theology does not matter or that courses in systematic theology are unimportant.

Those who would pastor the church of Jesus Christ must develop a careful, rigorous systematic theology. Such discipline will help you minister the Word of God to God's people in a variety of life's circumstances. The pastor who does not have this will at best miss many opportunities and at worst, confuse and hurt people by misrepresenting God to them.

There are many important biblical doctrines. I will highlight just a few of the most essential ones for this subject.

Certainly you need to grasp and go deep into your study of the doctrine of sin. An appreciation of what the Bible says about sin will destroy all utopian myths. Such myths permeate our culture. We live in a world that seems always to be progressing and we are regularly told about things that are going to get better. We must not allow the dizzying advances in medicine and technology to blind us to the desperate reality of sin.

In Romans 3:10-20 Paul takes several Old Testament snapshots of sin and weaves them together into an imposing mosaic. Paul writes as if he is following the path of a spiritual tornado. To see the universality of sin and the devastation it has wreaked not on human nature alone but on all of creation is to be reoriented toward the problem of evil in the world. As John Gerstner so aptly put it, the problem is not so much the problem of pain but the problem of pleasure. Given what the Bible says about sin,

why isn't this world filled with streets flowing with blood? It ought to be, in light of the wickedness of sin. But God, in his mercy and grace, restrains sin and sinners and we come to appreciate more of that grace and mercy only in the light of sin. Because of sin, tragedy and suffering are inevitable.

Second, develop a healthy doctrine of the devil. By healthy, I do not mean popular. Too much that is popularly believed about satan is not at all healthy. The devil is wicked. He is purely evil in ways that are beyond our ability to comprehend. Think of how the Bible portrays him. He is the one who originates lies, who is a murderer, who comes to destroy. Think about the power of the devil. The Bible ascribes incredible power to him—power to ensnare, to make sick, to work miracles and even to kill. We must believe everything the Bible says about the devil and never forget him. But we must also remember that the devil is inferior to God. He is God's devil. He is like a dog on a leash. God can let him out and He can pull him back. So as we acknowledge his power we must not fall into dualism. The devil belongs to God.

Third, develop a doctrine of heaven and hell. People too often lose sight of eternity. We need a two-world view if we are going to live biblically. This world is not all that there is. We must constantly remind our people of this because all the advertisements and entertainment produced by our culture are designed to focus our attention exclusively on this world. The temporary nature of this world is kept out of view. People are bombarded with thoughts of getting every benefit and payoff here and now. But the Bible teaches about heaven and hell.

Along with this, develop a doctrine of judgment. Because God has designed us in His image, there is within us a desire for justice. This desire is right and it remains even in our fallen nature. It does not always work itself out properly because of sin, but it is there. So we should be sensitive to the cry for justice that sometimes expresses itself in terms of "it's not fair" or "it's not right." Such laments are too often quickly dismissed as self-centered protests (and they may well be only that). But the impulse that desires justice is a reflection of God who is Himself just and we ought to understand and teach a doctrine of justice and judgment that distinguishes the cry for justice from the desire for vengeance.

The former is right. The latter is wrong. Romans 12:19 says, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." It can be a great comfort to those who have been tremendously mistreated to know that God will make things right. They should be urged to commit themselves to their faithful Creator who always will judge righteously (1 Peter 4:19).

Study and think clearly about the doctrine of conversion. What does it mean to be a real Christian? That sounds so simple in our day but, sadly, it is naive to assume that everyone in our churches has a biblical view of this. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? How does one become one? Of what is a real Christian capable in the face of tragedy?

The reality of remaining sin in the life of every believer should make us cautious and gracious in our judgments of those who respond intemperately to trials. Job did not look like a model of faith while in the throes of suffering. What do faith and repentance look like in a fiery trial? Being clear on this will prevent us from encouraging unrealistic and unhealthy responses to suffering.



We must guard against stoicism, on the one hand. Some Christians equate keeping faith in the midst of suffering with maintaining a stiff upper lip. But a refusal to feel the pain of tragedy is superficial. God never calls us to that. There is a time to weep. If Christ calls us to do anything it is to be real and to respond realistically. He Himself did that. Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb. He wept and cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane. He visibly and audibly suffered on the cross. And He never tells us to be faithful by denying our emotions.

Stoicism is not the answer. But on the other hand, neither is an unbridled emotionalism where emotions and passions rule. We must guard against that. How do you do that? By remembering what we are and what we have in Christ. We must learn and encourage others to learn to focus on unseen realities, especially when suffering. 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 teaches this:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

The most important issue is the doctrine of God. How does God fit into these things we experience as tragedies? Study and believe the sovereignty of God. What does the Bible say about His sovereignty? It says that He is absolutely sovereign without any mitigation. That is offensive to many people, but it is a fact from the Scriptures. The Bible teaches that God is absolutely sovereign in the details of life. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from God's will (Matthew 11:29).

The Bible also teaches that God is infinitely good. "You are good and do good" (Psalm 119:68). Goodness is an attribute both of His person and of His work.

The Bible teaches that God is full of wisdom. He is infinitely wise. That is, He always does the best things in the best way. After writing about the plan of God's gracious salvation for eleven chapters Paul erupts in praise of divine knowledge and wisdom (Romans 11:33). The more clearly we see what the Lord has done and the more deeply we will be amazed, like Paul, at His wisdom.

Christians are called to believe that God is always sovereign, wise and good at the same time. These attributes of God are foundational for faith in the midst of trial. Whether it seems like it or not, God is always sovereign, good, and wise and all of the temptations to respond in ways that would deny any of these characteristics are always wrong. Believers must fight against such temptations and remember and believe the truth about God.

Along with the character of God, study His will. How do you understand the will of God? If you have a simplistic view of the divine will, you will be hopelessly confused in trying to read the Bible and apply it to the world.

The Bible speaks of God's will as both secret and revealed. James Boyce, the principle founder of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has a very good section on the will of God in his *Abstract of Systematic Theology*. He makes some very nuanced arguments about how we should understand God's will as it's set before us in the Scripture. Whether or not one agrees with the details of Boyce's discussion his main point is absolutely critical. That is, one must recognize that God's will is both decretive as well as revealed. He has

a will of decree and a will he has made known to us for is our duty.

Scripture speaks clearly that God's will, in the sense of His decree, cannot be broken. In Daniel 4:35 we see that King Nebuchadnezzar finally learned this. "All the inhabitants of earth are reputed as nothing, he does according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain his hand or say to him, 'what have you done?'" Job also learned this lesson and so he prayed, "I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You" (42:2). In terms of His decree, God's will is going to be worked out always and infallibly.

In terms of what God has revealed for us to do, as summarized in His law, His will is often violated. In that sense, no one measures up to God's will at any time in this life in a perfect way. We are called to live our lives in accordance with His revealed will and it is by this will—His law—that we will ultimately be judged.

Without this two-fold understanding of God's will, you cannot come to a balanced perspective about God's ways with us. It is His (revealed) will that we live perfectly. This does not happen in this world. It is also His (decreed) will that all of our imperfections, indeed every event in the world, work together for the good of His people and the glory of His Name.

Deuteronomy 29:29 is an important verse to remember when thinking of God's will. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." We live in the light of what God has commanded and we leave the secret things concerning His decree with Him.

All of these doctrines get their focus and come together in the doctrine of Christ. It is here that we need to live and from which we need to minister. Think through His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and His return. It is in Christ that we find all the other teachings of the Scripture culminating and being expressed in a way that gives us hope and meaning in the midst of and in the wake of real tragedy.

We can with confidence say that "we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus knows what you are going through when you suffer. God knows what it is like to have a son die. He has experienced that. Christ knows what it is to be mistreated, to be subjected to moral evil in the world, to be unjustly treated. He has experienced these things.

And in His cross we are given the paradigm by which all tragedies in the world are to be evaluated. Was the crucifixion of Jesus the will of God? That is a question that should be asked of those who reject the idea that God can in no way will tragedies of life. The death of Jesus is the most atrocious, scandalous, heinous, unjust crime in all of human history. Nothing compares to what happened to Christ on the cross. If there is any event that should never have happened in terms of the laws of justice on a human level, it is the execution of Jesus Christ. Was that God's will? God says "You shall not murder." Men murdered Him, didn't they? Then His death was clearly a violation of God's revealed will.

But do we not also read time and again in Scripture how Jesus' death on the cross was the very purpose for which He came? He is the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the



world" (Revelation 13:8) and "it pleased the Lord to bruise Him" (Isaiah 53:10).

So was the crucifixion of Jesus the will of God? The question cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." First, one must determine what aspect of God's will is in view. If the question is about God's secret will—His decreed will, then the answer is yes, infallibly. If, however, the question is about God's revealed will, then the answer is no.

Peter keeps both aspects in mind in his sermon at Pentecost. He says of Jesus, "Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" (Acts 2:23). Peter tells his hearers that they have sinned, they have violated God's will by crucifying Jesus. They are guilty and accountable before God for the death of Jesus. But in another sense God did this according to His own foreknowledge and predetermined purpose.

So where was God at the crucifixion of Jesus? Was He there? Absolutely He was there. Nor was He a mere bystander, He was orchestrating the events. God was doing His greatest work, redeeming people to Himself in an event that looked like a completely gratuitous tragedy. This becomes the paradigm by which we must measure every other tragedy in life. If God was doing His deepest work in the greatest tragedy of human history then we must be willing to believe that God is also doing great works in lesser tragedies of life. That is the hope that pastors must give their people. We must call people to look to Christ, to believe in the goodness of God in Christ, to see it, to live off of it, to taste it, to try to bring it into experience before tragedy and then to go on living on that truth in the midst of and in the wake of tragedy.

Out of all of these other truths grows the doctrine of providence. Just like the incarnation and the Trinity, so providence is a mystery. God has taught us that He is sovereign over the events of life but that does not in any way mitigate our responsibility for our actions. We must, therefore, live with the tension these truths produce because they are revealed. And the certainties that He has taught us about our faith gives strength to face the mysteries without despair.

Conclusion

Expect tragedies and tribulations to occur. Do not be surprised by them. Prepare for them because the Scripture says they are inevitable. Learn from them. Do not miss the lessons. There is much to be learned through suffering. In 2 Corinthians 1:8–10 Paul says that he was "burdened beyond measure, above strength", so that he "despaired even of life." And the reason that this happened to him (as he later came to understand) was so that he might learn not to trust in himself "but in God who raises the dead." He is saying, "tragedy came to teach me to trust God." Three chapters later he refers to those trials as light and momentary. In chapter 1 he says "I nearly died by them" but in chapter 4 he says they are light and fleeting, "working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (4:17). Tragedy prepares you for glory. Tragedy works in you the ability to experience greater glory. We may not understand exactly how this is so, but that is what Paul says.

Trials wean us away from the world. They lead us to develop greater desires for heaven. When we suffer losses we are forced to remember that the things which are seen are temporary and fading away. Such times direct our vision to the unseen realities that are eternal.

Through tragedies we discover sin that may lie deeply buried in our hearts. Trials have a way of bringing such sin to light. Moses was the meekest man in all the earth the Scripture says. And yet in the midst of tragedy, we see his passions sinfully displayed. Or think of Job. His patience is proverbial and yet in his story his impatience is starkly displayed. Tragedy exposes our remaining sin thereby helping us to see our need for repentance.

Respond pastorally to tragedies. People are not interested in nor do they need a lecture on theodicy when they are awaiting the emergency room doctor's report or facing a fresh grave. Every pastor ought to develop and constantly refine an imminently biblical theodicy, but none should feel compelled to say everything at any one moment. When the opportunity to speak does come, speak honestly, wisely and lovingly. But speak with consideration to what the Larger Catechism calls "the necessity and capacity of your hearers."

Address people in terms of what they can handle and what they need. Jesus did not tell his disciples everything at once. On the night He was betrayed He said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (John 16:12). It is also instructive to note what Jesus did not say in Luke 13 when tragedies stemming from human malice and natural disaster were brought to His attention. He did not try to explain them. He did not try to defend God. Rather, He seizes the opportunity to call them to self-examination and repentance.

I love the Heidelberg Catechism. The first question and answer summarizes much of what I have tried to communicate in this article.

Question: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

Answer: "That I am not my own but belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my father in heaven."

To know and believe this is to be equipped to provide encouragement to any child of God when tragedy comes.

Notes:

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: MacMillan, 1962), 93.

How Could God Allow This Tsunami?

God and Tsunami and the Goodness in Human Beings That Provides A Basis for Radical Hope
Rabbi Michael Lerner

The following was received in an email from Rabbi Michael Lerner of Tikkun Magazine. www.pubtheo.com

Greetings! In the midst of grieving for the horrible losses of life and collecting monies to help the victims, I received a note on the Ask The Rabbi section of Tikkun's website (<http://www.tikkun.org/>). He asked: how could God have allowed this to happen?

Most religions seem to imply that there is order and reason which guide the events of the world. Yet, my questioner pointed out, the recent tragedies in South and Southeast Asia and a range of other unfair things in the world make these notions of order and reason very problematic and



unacceptable.

My answer follows.

Let me start with this: I don't know. I think that whatever else I say below, I want to start with the fact that I do not know, that there is a limitation of knowledge and understanding built into being a human being at this stage in the development of the consciousness of the universe. I was not there when the foundations of the universe were being put together-and that is a point that was made to in the Book of Job long ago when he similarly questioned the way the universe works. Having said that, I want to consider several lines of possible response, as long as you understand that I know that these are NOT ANSWERS but only responses to the question as you pose it. The difference is this: an answer seeks to dissolve the question, a response recognizes the ongoing validity of the question and seeks to remain in connection with it.

1. I'll start with a response I have some (but not 100%) sympathy with, but which I think deserves some continuing attention-the answer from karma or universal justice, and it goes like this: The tectonic moves of the earth are part of a totally integrated moral system that has been in place since the earth began to evolve. That moral system, described by the Bible, tells us that the physical world will be unable to function in a peaceful and gentle way until the moral/spiritual dimension manifest in the behavior of God's creatures coheres with God's will: that is, is filled with justice, peace, generosity and kindness. The earth is a biological/ethical/spiritual unity, and its functioning is in accord with its aspirations toward consciousness, love, environmental sensitivity, generosity, and social justice but when there are contradictions or constraints in the development of love, consciousness, environmental sensitivity, social justice, and generosity then there is a malfunction which eventually manifests in physical disorders, whether they be disease or whether they be earthquakes or tornadoes or floods or other disruptions of nature. This is basically the point of the Bible's account of the plagues facing Egypt, but now working on a global level. As the Torah makes clear, this karmic order doesn't happen on a one-to-one basis: i.e. it isn't as if everyone who suffered in the plagues of Egypt was directly responsible for the enslavement and oppression of Jewish slaves, and the Torah's claim that if we do not create a society based on love, kindness, generosity, justice and peace we will face ecological disaster is not a claim that each person who suffers from this disaster will be equally responsible for the moral disorder that generated the ecological crisis. But what the Torah is implying is this: there is no one alive on the planet who doesn't have some part of the responsibility for the craziness that manifests in lack of justice, kindness, generosity, peace and love. We are all ONE, and that means the totality of the moral craziness is our collective responsibility, and the environmental dysfunction that that moral craziness produces will eventually impact on all of us alike. Now, if you answer, "but why strike the weak in SouthEast Asia and not the strong in the US?" the answer might be, "it will happen here as well, has been happening in many ways already in the form of cancer epidemics and other environmental diseases," but it might also be, "we are all one, and when the earth is morally dysfunctional the tectonic movement of its plates manifests all over and not in ways that we can directly correlate in a one to one relationship with who did the latest moral outrage and where." An analogy: when we inhale and eat various environmental poisons which we ourselves created in the factories of advanced industrial societies, they may

eventually cause cancer of the liver or the kidneys or the stomach. Now imagine a stomach or liver cell making the following argument: "It wasn't me who took in this cancer-causing material, but the brain, the mouth, the hands-so it is unfair that I should be suffering when it was done by these other organs!" Well, I guess it has a case to be made, but only on the supposition that the liver cell or the kidney or stomach cell isn't part of the same unity as the hand, brain or mouth that ingested the poison in the first place. In any event, this is the current form of the argument that there is in fact a karmic explanation for what is happening today that should alert us to the need to do immediate tikkun olam to bring the world into a lasting harmony. [one other objection to consider to this: how can the deaths of tens of thousands be seen as a result of global injustice, which after all is so much of a lesser offense than this massive death caused by the tsunami? Well, if we could measure justice by numbers involved, then the objection is completely misguided. According to a U.N. report issued a few weeks ago, the results of which should be familiar to all of you who regularly receive Tikkun Mail where these results were summarized, over 29,000 children die every single day as a result of malnutrition and diseases related to inadequate food, health care, and other socially constructed problem. More on this below.]

2. But will there really be no earthquakes in the messianic era -the period when human beings create our institutions based on love, generosity, environmental sensitivity, kindness, compassion for all life, social justice, non-violence and peace? The first point above needs to claim that that is how it will be, but I'm not sure that that is true. So if it is not, then we need to reject the notion that everything that happens has a divine cause. We need not reject that there is a karmic order such as is described in point one, only that it does not explain IT DOES NOT EXPLAIN EVERYTHING. But, if it doesn't, the questioner can legitimately ask, how do we understand the nature of God? My answer here is very tentative, because I know how very little I can possibly know about the ultimate reality of the universe. So what I say must be filled with the crude level of understanding that we humans have gotten to at this point in the evolution of consciousness. But here is what I would say (Ideas developed partially in my previous books, particularly Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation, and in Spirit Matters: Global Healing and the Wisdom of the Soul, and which will be further developed in a book that I'm writing now for which I have not yet found a publisher: Global Judaism and Universal Healing of the Planet):

First, stop thinking of God as some big man up in heaven sitting there and making individual judgments about who shall live and who shall die, where he should put a tsunami and where he should put a beautiful sunset. Instead, understand God as THE FORCE OF HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE UNIVERSE, the aspect of the universe that is the source of love, kindness, generosity, social justice, peace and evolving consciousness, and that this aspect of the universe permeates every ounce of being, every cell, and unifies all being as it moves the being of the universe toward greater and greater levels of love and connection and consciousness, and makes possible the transcending of that which is toward that which ought to be. Seen this way, God is not the all-powerful being that determines every moment of creation, but rather the part of creation aspiring toward love, kindness, generosity, peace, and social justice which is evolving toward greater power to shape our common destiny to the extent that we choose to embody it more fully. Heresy, you say? Only if



your conception of God derives from a Greek notion of the All-Knowing, All Powerful Unmoved Mover-a conception which at times has seeped into and shaped medieval theologies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but which isn't the only possible way to understand God. If, on the other hand, we take our cues from parts of Torah that think of God as bemoaning the choices that human beings made, even at times thinking that maybe S/He made a mistake in creating humans, or as weeping over the consequences of Diaspora (Shechina, the Divine presence, going into Exile with the Jews according to one midrash), or as suffering from the consequences of human choices, or the Christian vision of God as needing to suffer on the Cross, then you get a different and more vulnerable vision of God, one more in accord with the notion of God not as the one responsible for everything that happens, but as an emerging voice of compassion and love in the midst of a world not totally under His/Her control. In that case, and this conception aligns more closely to what I understand with my limited understanding, God is joining us in mourning for the victims of the Tsunami, not its cause. Or, to put it another way, God is the part of Being (including the part of us) that is yearning for a world in which this kind of suffering will be diminished and in which those parts of the suffering that can't be stopped will be accompanied by responses of generosity and kindness.

The GOOD NEWS OF THE TSUNAMI: Look at the worldwide outcry of pain and concern about the victims of this terrible tragedy, and the universal response of people trying to help, donate money, time, energy to supporting the victims. From every corner of the world people are standing up and acting in generous and kind ways. This is the foundation for our Tikkun Community position of Radical Hope. When people are freed momentarily from the societal constraints laid upon them by the cynical realist worldview that tells them they would be foolish to be altruistic because everyone around them is going to take advantage of them should they act on any such "utopian" or "adolescent" fantasies that the world is made up of good people, when they are no longer being told by the media that "the other" is really an "enemy" that is just waiting for a chance to hurt us, then watch how generously they act! This aspiration toward goodness, generosity, care for the stranger whom we have never met and who will never give us a "return on our investment" of caring--this is the aspect of human nature that is totally obscured and denied by contemporary capitalist culture, as it has previously been obscured and denied by every previously existing ruling elite and their religious/ philosophical/social theory ideologies. When there are no such social, religious, political, or other constraints, when the society momentarily lets down its demands that everyone be a cynical realist, then what pops out from only an inch below the surface of our collective consciousness is a huge amount of compassion, generosity, love and caring for others, caring for the stranger, etc. That is why I interpret the Torah's injunction "You shall love the stranger" not solely as a commandment, but also and most importantly as a prediction of what will happen when we build a world based on our highest understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God.

DOWNSIDE of THIS MOMENTARY UPSURGE OF CARING: Nothing is ever just one thing and not something else as well--all of reality is filled with both A and Not A, because the laws of logic are not a satisfactory description of the way the world really is. So, yes, there is tremendous amount of caring. But there is another truth: the powerful only allow this caring to be expressed when there is no

conceivable link to changing their global class structure and the elaborate systems of oppression that they've set up. Let me explain:

The powerful have decided to make this the headline story in every newspaper and every news broadcast on television, radio, and webcast. No wonder they are able to get the world's attention, and once there, and with appropriate cues that it is allowed for us to be generous, the generosity that is REALLY ALWAYS THERE pours forth from all humanity.

But a few weeks ago I forwarded you a UN report that told you that on average over 29,000 children die every single day from preventable malnutrition and disease.

The media gave this almost no attention when it was revealed.

Imagine if every day the headlines in every newspaper in the world and every television show was: "29,000 children died yesterday from preventable diseases and malnutrition" and then the rest of the stories alternated between detailed personal accounts of families where this devastation was taking place, and side bar features detailing what was happening in advanced industrial countries, like this: "all this suffering was happening while the wealthiest people in the world enjoyed excesses of food, worried about how to lose weight because they eat too much, spent monies trying to convince farmers not to grow too much food for fear that doing so would drive down prices, and were cutting the taxes of their wealthiest rather than seeking to redistribute their excess millions of dollars of personal income." If the story were told that way every day, the goodness of human beings would rebel quickly against these social systems that made all this suffering possible, suffering far far far far far in excess of all the suffering caused by tsunamis and other natural disasters (if there really are such things as "natural" disasters--point no. one above questioned that separation between the natural and the spiritual). If we were being told this true story every day, we'd quickly find that the progressive forces seeking a new global reality would come to power in democratic elections, and that the ideas that we in The Tikkun Community propose, like the Social Responsibility Amendment to the US Constitution (corporations with incomes of \$50 million/yr or more must get a new corporate charter once every ten years, and will only be granted to those which can prove to a jury of ordinary citizens a satisfactory history of social responsibility), the Global Marshall Plan (let the U.S. lead the advanced industrial societies in a global consortium dedicating 5% of their combined GNP each year for the next twenty years to alleviating hunger, homelessness, poverty, inadequate education and inadequate health care), and the Sabbatical Year (every one on the planet stop producing goods one year out of every seven and we all engage in collective reflection on how we want to remake our world--described more fully in Spirit Matters) would no longer seem "unrealistic" to most people on the planet, but immediate survival necessities. CONCLUSION: those who despair are mistaken--the goodness of humanity is just on the verge of being released, and our task is to find the best way to facilitate that development. The point is that we are never encouraged to show caring for the kinds of problems we could actually deal with through collective restructuring of the world's economic and political arrangements--because that would threaten the interests of the powerful. So they are all too glad to divert our attention to the disasters that can't be changed, and to channeling our anger into anger at God instead of anger at our social



system. And this, I might add, is the limit on how we are encouraged to respond. All the newspapers tell us how to make individual donations to relief agencies, and we at TIKKUN 100% support your doing just that. For example, we endorse giving money through :American Jewish World Service, Asia Tsunami Relief, 45 West 36th Street, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, 800- 889-7146. However, we also know that there has been little willingness to make demands on the governments of the advanced industrial societies to make serious levels of contributions. In light of a comment made criticizing the stinginess of US efforts, the State Dept. announced a decision to increase aid by \$20 million, when adequate aid would be in the tens of billions of dollars (still far less than what President Bush will be seeking to pursue his insane and destructive and immoral war on the people of Iraq). As long as the focus is on our individual donations, and not on governments using their huge resources to provide adequate levels of relief and rebuilding, the powerful are happy to focus on this particular disaster while leaving the socially constructed disasters of the globalization of their economic system out of the picture and out of our attention.

In any event, I hope you understand that these reflections are put forward in a spirit of humility, because I do not really claim to understand, and yet still feel that it is important to begin this discussion with those who are asking deep questions about the current disaster. I apologize in advance to those who hold different conceptions of God, or certainty that there is no God, and ask that even with these differences please let us work together to bring about the world of loving-kindness that we seek in The Tikkun Community, because all of these differences are welcome, and our community is not one based on one "correct line" about God or the absence of God, because every form of theology and every form of atheism are still welcome within our community, as long as you remain committed to our fundamental belief: that we can and should build a New Bottom Line of love, caring, generosity, ecological sensitivity, awe and wonder at the grandeur of all that is, and celebration of all the goodness in the universe (even as we mourn for and do our best to alleviate all the unnecessary suffering).

It's not too late to help Tikkun spread its message and do the work we are doing--spreading our message of hope, building a Progressive Spiritual Activism, building the support for Middle East Peace and reconciliation, supporting our campaign for ethical consumption in the U.S. and the advanced industrial societies and for a Global Marshall Plan to alleviate world hunger and homelessness and poverty, supporting our campaign to challenge the economic forces that have created global warming, and supporting our campaign for a New Bottom Line in all our economic, political and social institutions. Please send a tax-deductible contribution now-- \$5,000, \$2,500, \$1,000, \$500, \$250, \$100 or whatever you can afford--in one of three ways: 1. Click here to Donate on line to Tikkun

2. Send us a check (if you want it to apply as a tax deduction for the tax year ending Dec. 31st, 2004, please date it by Dec.31st) and mail to: Tikkun, 2342 Shattuck Ave, Berkeley, California 94704. Please accompany it with your email address and phone.

3. Or Send us your credit card info including exp. date and the name as it appears on your card, plus your full mailing address to which the card gets its bills, plus your email and home phone.

P.s. Some people wonder why these messages get accompanied by requests for donations. There is one simple reason: we could not publish our magazine or afford to sustain our website nor could we afford to pay our tiny staff of five people if we didn't have this support. We work day and night to bring you information, analysis, organize conferences, bring people to DC to meet with the opinion shapers and power brokers, and otherwise get a progressive viewpoint heard in the media--but we can only do that with your financial backing.

Try to imagine for a second how very little I like asking for money. It pains me to have to do this--because I wish I lived in a world where money had been abolished and each of us just voluntarily gave our energies to each other, shared food and resources and talents freely, etc. Unfortunately, till we get there, we at Tikkun need to ask for your support. So please act now--either to JOIN our interfaith organization (orthodox atheists welcome as well) The TIKKUN COMMUNITY (membership in which also gives you a year subscription to Tikkun Magazine) or by donating to TIKKUN. Click here to Join The Tikkun Community

Warmest regards for a Happy New Year to all who observe this New Year as a holiday!! Let peace prevail on earth, let this year see an end to the war in Iraq, the genocide in Darfur, and the Occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, massive funding to rebuild all that has been destroyed in wake of the Tsunami-- and the beginning of a new awakening of the world toward greater and greater levels of kindness, generosity and love, and a recognition that we are all one, that our well-being depends on the well being of everyone else on the planet.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, The Tikkun Community

Reflection on the Tsunami Disaster

by Paul Grayston

<http://www.anglicantas.org.au/tasmaniananglican/200502/200502-11.html>

Dear God, I simply do not understand.

||

Where are you, God?
In this collision
Of events and factors and forces
Which should kill 100,000 and more
and crush the homes and livelihoods of millions,
Where are you in this?

Where are you, God?
You who made the ocean floor
Who filled the earth with people
Who is in control of
Earthquake, tsunami, beaches, huts, hotels.
Where are you in this?

Where are you, God?
When babies and children and the very old
And people with disabilities
And the poor and landless
Those you claim to have a bias towards
Have been overwhelmingly the victims
Where are you in this?



Where are you, God?
Are you changing our understanding
Of the God we thought we knew?
Are you teaching us compassion for the poor
Are you making the human family more intimate
Are you changing the world in
a way we cannot yet see?
(and is it worth the cost?)

Where are you, God?
Are you an aid worker, a
soldier,
A volunteer doctor, a
neighbour,
A helicopter pilot,
Anyone who cares and prays:
Is that where you are in this?

Where are you, God?
Were you playing on a beach
at Phuket;
Were you riding a train in Sri
Lanka;
Were you a fisherman;
Did you live by the sea in
Aceh?
Is that where you are in this?

Where are you, God?
Worse than not knowing would
be
Not to cry out to you,
To deny your love; to lose
sight of your presence.
The worst thing we could do is
to leave you out of it And
neglect to ask,
Where are you, God, where
are you, in all this?

III
The scriptures everywhere
describe your voice as like the
roar of rushing waters.
Lord help me, your church and
your world to hear your voice
in this calamity.
Let us hear your voice in
rushing waters, in the cries of
those suffer, in the silence of
the dead and
disappeared.

Lord, help us to trust in you.
Lord teach us to play our part
in support of the survivors.
Lord, help us to go on with
you.
Lord be with us
As we weep,
and give
and pray.

Lord may we turn to you.

Extract from an address given
by Paul Grayston at St John's, Launceston Tasmania on
Sunday 2 Jan 2005

O God, that Great Tsunami

1. O God, that great tsu - na - mi has stunned us one and all.
2. How ma - ny folk have per - ished? We can't their bod - ies find:
3. E - con - o - mies are ru - ined and lives in tat - ters lie,

Our neigh - bors reel in an - guish while homes and cit - ies fall.
life will not be the same now for those they've left be - hind.
Sew - age is washed down - riv - er while lone - ly or - phans cry.

O God of wind and wa - ter who made the sea and sky,
More than a mil - lion mourn - ers are griev - ing to their core,
O Spir - it, send your com - fort and give us faith that cares,

a - mid such great de - struc - tion, we mourn - ful - ly ask, "Why?"
O Je - sus, Friend and Sa - vior, you suf - fer with the poor.
for when our neigh - bors suf - fer, our lives are bound with theirs.

WORDS: "The Storm Came to Honduras," Carolyn Winfrey Gillette.

Adaptation by Peter Holden.

PASSION CHORALE

MUSIC: Hans Leo Hassler, 1601, harm. Johann Sebastian Bach, 1729

7.6.7.6.D

Copyright © 1978, 2004 Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. Published by The United Methodist General Board of Discipleship, PO Box 340003, Nashville TN 37203-0003; telephone 615-340-7070; website http://www.umcworship.org. Free one-time permission is given to congregations using the hymn to support ecumenical relief efforts in response to the earthquake and tsunami of December 2004 in Asia, provided entire copyright citation is included on each copy. Hymn may not be used for profit, republished, or placed on a website without permission of the owner.



Catholic Relief Services Prayer Service for Tsunami Victims

Environment: *To help create a sacred space, place twelve candles in your worship area to represent the twelve countries that were deeply affected by the tsunami disaster. Please light each candle as the countries are named during the prayer service. At the close of the service, CRS Tsunami Prayer Cards can be distributed (available at www.crs.org).*

Invitation to Prayer: *(please stand)*

Leader: We come together to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who have experienced a harrowing natural disaster. We feel so helpless, yet want to be of help. As we look for ways to show our compassion and concern, we come to our God who has been for us both compassion and love.

Twelve candles are before us. Each candle represents the different nations impacted by this disaster. For these people we pray. For the people of Bangladesh...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of Burma...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of India...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of Indonesia...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of Kenya...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of Malaysia...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of Maldives...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of The Seychelles...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of Somalia...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of Sri Lanka...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of Tanzania...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: For the people of Thailand...

All: for you we pray.

Leader: We pray for you, and for all those struggling to cope with their grief and pain.

All: Amen.

Opening hymn:

"There is a Longing" (Spirit & Song, OCP Publications)

--or--

"You Are Mine" (Gather, GIA Publications)

Leader: Let us now open our minds and hearts to the word of God. *(please sit)*

Reading Suggestions:

Isaiah 54:10-14

Isaiah 55: 8-13

Romans 8: 22-28

Reflection: *This time can be used for an individual speaker (see CRS Tsunami Talking Points at www.crs.org), a shared group reflection, or a period of silence.*



(Prayer Service for Tsunami Victims cont.)

Prayers of the Faithful: *(please stand)*

Leader: Loving God, we place before you our needs and concerns, trusting in your mercy, and always grateful of your love and grace in our lives. Our response is: "Lord, hear our prayer."

- For those who perished, that Christ may welcome them to the shores of eternal peace, we pray to the Lord:
- For those who were injured physically and emotionally, that they may feel God's healing presence through those who minister to them, we pray to the Lord:
- For all relief workers, that they not be overwhelmed by the task, but strengthened by the difference they are making for the victims, we pray to the Lord:
- For all of us, that through our thoughts, prayers and support, we might promote a sense of solidarity among all the peoples of the world, we pray to the Lord:
- For a sustained effort to rebuild the lives and livelihoods of our brothers and sisters in need, we pray to the Lord:

Leader: Lord, hear these and all the needs of your people. Give us the strength to serve you as we pray the words our Savior Jesus taught us...

All: Our Father . . .

Sign of Peace: *The leader invites the participants to share with each other a sign of peace.*

Concluding Prayer and Blessing:

Leader: God, our Creator, we raise our hearts, minds and souls, to you at this time of need. Many members of our human family have suffered severely due to the recent earthquakes and tsunami. We mourn for those who have perished, and share our compassion for those who remain. Send your Spirit, the author of life and the one who inspires us to grow beyond ourselves. May we be the answer to Jesus' prayer, "that they all may be one."

All: Amen

Leader: May the Lord bless us (+), protect us from all harm, and bring us to everlasting life.

All: Amen

Leader: As we go forth today, we will receive a memorial prayer card. May it serve as a reminder for us to continue in our concern for the people affected by the tsunami in Southeast Asia.

Sending Forth Song:

"Christ Be Our Light" (Spirit & Song, OCP Publications)

--or--

"We Are Many Parts" (Gather, GIA Publications)

*Catholic Relief Services is the official overseas relief and development agency of the US Catholic Community.
www.crs.org • 1-877-HELP-CRS • Catholic Relief Services, P.O. Box 17090, Baltimore, MD 21203-7090.*