

WHERE WAS GOD?

A Response to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 26th December 2004

On 26th December 2004 at 0759 local time (0059 GMT), a violent rupture in the fault line between the Australian and Eurasian tectonic plates occurred around 100 miles (160 km) off the coast of Sumatra at a depth of around 6.2 miles (10km), generating an earthquake of magnitude 9.0 on the Richter scale. The quake caused a tsunami in the Indian Ocean which probably reached speeds of 500 mph (800 km/hr) in open sea. As it reached land it slowed to around 27 mph (45 km/hr) but was squeezed up to massive heights. The waves caused massive destruction in several countries across the Ocean, resulting in the loss of at least 150,000 lives (with more deaths expected from disease over coming weeks).

The Questions

This disaster has led to a huge global response in providing aid. Many have been stunned by the sheer scale and extent of the suffering. In the midst of this questions have been asked about God's role in the disaster – where was He, and why did He let it happen?

The allegation is simple – it runs something like this:

God is either good but not all powerful or else He is all powerful but not good, or perhaps He doesn't even exist at all

The 2 quotes below show how prevalent such questions have been:

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

(Dennis Dutton, quoted by Ron Rosenbaum, New York Observer)

When we are faced with such an overwhelming catastrophe, only simpletons and the ignorant look to the heavens for an explanation ... The enlightened response is neither to curse the man upstairs, nor fall prostrate before him, but to roll up our sleeves and lend a helping hand.

(Robert Paul Reyes, Lynchburg Ledger)

Historical Context

This is not the first time that an earthquake has led to discussion about the existence and activity of God. In 1755 the Portuguese capital Lisbon was hit by an earthquake that killed over 50,000 people. The philosopher Voltaire asked what kind of God could permit such a thing to happen, and why was Lisbon singled out? Was Lisbon more sinful than London or Paris? This event added to the debate raging at that time (of the Enlightenment) about God's existence, and how involved the Creator is in His creation. Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright writes:

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 the tidal waves declare his incompetence?"

Some Answers that Have Been Suggested

Just as many people have been asking questions about God, so many have tried to provide answers about the meaning of the disaster. These answers have been varied:

1. South Asian Religions

An article for Newsweek included on *MSNBC News* written by Kenneth L Woodward commented on responses by the major faiths of South Asia:

- a. **Hinduism** – "Hindus use the deities to think about and explain happenings like the tsunami as destructive acts of god. Relating to the local deity and cooling her anger through propitiation is more important than thinking about personal or collective guilt for what has happened." (Richard Davis, specialist in South Asian Hinduism at Bard College, New York).

- b. **Buddhism** – “when the time comes to make sense of it all, Buddhists will look to the idea of karma and ask what they did, individually and collectively, that a tragedy like this happened.” (Donald Lopez, professor of Buddhist studies at University of Michigan) – response to generate as much good merit to transfer to deceased as positive force for their next lifetime – therefore families will go to temple to pray or have a special ceremony performed by a monk
- c. **Islam** – All that happens is Allah’s doing, and nature itself – wind, rain, storms – constitutes signs of his mercy and compassion. Even the tsunami, therefore, must have some hidden, positive purpose. “Ninety percent of Muslims will understand a tragedy like this in this way. On the individual level, they also have this notion that God is testing them by taking away a child or a spouse. Will you lose your faith or will you continue to believe?” (Akbar Ahmed, chair of Islamic studies at American University). Ahmed argues that this idea of testing, and the patience it requires provides “an inbuilt psychological cushion which allows Muslims to absorb a tragedy of this scale”.

2. A warning from God:

Other religious leaders have seen in the disaster a warning from God

a. *About the sinfulness of mankind*

- (i) Israeli Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar to Reuters: “This is an expression of God’s great ire with the world. The world is being punished for wrongdoing – be it people’s needless hatred of each other, lack of charity, moral turpitude.”
- (ii) One Buddhist leader said it represented God’s resentment of the “huge amount of pent-up man-made evil on earth”
- (iii) A Muslim mullah in Indonesia said it was a “reminder from God he created the world and can destroy the world”
- (iv) Some Hindus in India claimed it was a judgement because of the arrest in 2004 of a Hindu leader, Kanchi Shankaracharya, on murder charges

BUT how can we know if this is so, and if so whose sin is responsible? This does not explain why so many innocent children died, and the seemingly indiscriminate nature of the death and destruction. If it is a warning about sin, why did God chose South Asia (just as Voltaire asked “Why Lisbon?”)

b. *Of the End Times*

Some religious people will interpret the disaster as a sign that the world will end soon – for example one Jehovah’s Witness from Cyprus called Maria who was quoted in Reuters on Yahoo News. BUT although the Bible says that we should remember that the end is coming when we see such events (e.g. Matthew 24:7), there is no way to tell when the Lord will return and this is not to say that God directly causes the disasters.

3. It is ultimately man’s fault for not improving the world enough yet

If some people try to pin the blame not on God but man by blaming mankind’s sin, others attempt to do so by emphasising that we could have prevented many of the deaths by better warning measures. Rabbi Daniel Lapin, writing in the *Jewish Press*, suggests that Western civilisation is superior because it is based on biblical principles, including the imperatives to make ourselves less vulnerable to nature, and to preserve human life. He cites the absence of a tsunami warning system in the Indian Ocean (when one exists in the Pacific) as evidence for this. He concludes: “A long time ago, God in His book provided the incentive and encouragement to survive nature. He isn’t to blame for the deaths in the Asian disaster if those fatalities are attributable to misguided cultures.”

4. God weeps with us but cannot help:

Rabbi Kushner wrote the book “Why bad things happen to good people”. He experienced the suffering of a son dying, and in his reasoning he came to conclusion that God is benevolent but is not omnipotent, and therefore is unable to prevent disasters like the tsunami. His followers would emphasise that God wept too when He saw what happened.

5. God is powerful but bad

This is a rather less common response, but is advocated by some, for example Jim Holt who wrote, "the world is not presided over by a deity who is all-good and all-powerful, but rather by one who is 100 percent malevolent but only 80 percent effective". Of course this belief, like Kushner's is based on the individual's reasoning rather than any revelation from that "deity".

6. God protected His own people:

Some religious people have attempted to ease the effect of the disaster with stories of miraculous escapes. Examples include the churchgoers in Phuket who escaped because they were in church on the Sunday morning rather than on the beach, the Salvation Army officer in Sri Lanka who told how all their officers survived, a pastor in Sri Lanka who climbed onto the roof of his house with his family and escaped, the house collapsing just after they came down from the roof, and another Sri Lanka pastor who was in a bus with his wife – the bus was lifted up by the wave, but came down safely.

BUT, what about all those people who were NOT saved? For example, in the Sri Lankan city of Mullaittivu a church building containing a worshipping congregation was swept into the sea, all the lives seemingly being lost, while two other pastors from that same city suffered terrible losses (one lost 9 family members and the other lost his wife and 2 children). Did God forget about these Christians, or were they not faithful enough? It seems difficult to reconcile or explain these stories satisfactorily. We need to be wary about trying to ease our own feeling of powerlessness by clinging onto the stories of hope. We risk belittling the scale of the disaster and suffering.

7. The earthquake happened by purely natural causes – we must look for God in the response of compassion

This argument says that God is in control, and he didn't intervene to stop the disaster, but He is now intervening in the relief provided. Many people struggle to accept this kind of argument. Ron Rosenbaum (*New York Observer*) writes:

For the atheists, if he doesn't exist, he couldn't have done it; for the believers, God has no responsibility for the catastrophe, just for the goodness displayed by the rescue workers in the aftermath, and the few 'miraculous' stories of survival. This is something I find particularly annoying: a God who can intervene to save a handful out of a hundred thousand and gets credit for all the goodness displayed in the aftermath of the havoc he wrought.

8. The world would be boring without disasters

This rather obscure response came from Matthew Parris, writing in *The Times*. He asks whether we would prefer a world where no cataclysms happened? He suggests that this would be a very dull world. This response is unlikely to bring much comfort to the suffering.

9. There is no God!

This is the conclusion reached by Martin Kettle writing in *The Guardian*, although it is noteworthy that he already believed this before the disaster. He suggests that the tsunami should reopen the question of how any God could allow such things, leading to a rejection of the existence of God:

Europe in the 18th century had the intellectual curiosity to ask and answer such questions. But can we say the same of 21st century Europe? Or are we too cowed [i.e. by fear of intolerance of religions] now to even ask if the God can exist that can do such things?

Reasons for the Questions and Arguments for God

So, God stands accused in the dock by man. The following quote of Allan Laing, writing in *The Glasgow Herald*, exemplifies the argument well:

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 wrecked, the scale of the misery it has caused, must surely test the faith of even the firmest believer. 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 mankind to indulge in a redemptive exercise of mass compassion.

It is interesting that most (if not all) of those accusing God do not genuinely believe in Him. Rather, the arguments are intended to convict not God but those people "foolish" enough to believe in Him. As Cal Thomas writes in *The Day* (a New London, Connecticut, paper):

The questions are mostly rhetorical, since by asking them, the questioners don't actually expect, or even desire, an answer. They are asked in an accusatory way, as if the questions themselves indict, try and convict as fools those who believe in God.

The real issue is, as an editorial in the *Telegraph* stated, that:

Like so many things in modern British life, agnosticism is not a function of deliberation and reasoning, but of apathy and indifference. We don't positively repudiate the idea of God, just as we don't positively reject the idea that politics can be of any use to us. We just don't give a damn.

The same editorial points out the lack of logic in the sceptics' arguments:

If terrible events are to constitute evidence that God does not exist, then every wonderful event – very cured cancer patient, every child rescued from a fire – has to be evidence that He does. The unbeliever would, by his own reasoning, have to accept that all fortunate things that have ever happened were proofs of God.

The simple fact is that this is how the world is – disasters do happen – this is not the first, and surely it won't be the last. There is no point basing arguments on claims such as "If God was like this, the world wouldn't be the way it is", as if **we** know all the facts and are in a position to draw our own conclusions from them. Who are we to try to explain the nature of God based on an event like this? The fact is that there is other evidence to consider that might enlighten us further about the true nature of God:

1. The shadow of sin that is always present

For example:

- a. Abduction of children by paedophiles
- b. Corruption leading to aid not getting where it should (Indonesia's President Yudhoyono has promised: "To ensure foreign assistance is being properly used, I will personally direct and control the funds")
- c. Use of aid for political ends (e.g. the Tamil Tigers and Sri Lanka government – whoever gives the aid will win the hearts of the people)
- d. The hypocrisy in the response to the tsunami when we have ignored poverty for so long (As one online writer asked, "Why all of a sudden do we care about the welfare of the people who have been affected by the tsunami, a natural disaster? Every day many of those people are poor and don't have enough to eat because we are greedy and want too much" – quoted on religionlink.org). We need such a shocking event to kick us into action!
- e. The way some people have used the amounts given by various countries to boast about the superior generosity of their own nation / culture etc. This is evidence of man's pride even in his good actions.
- f. The fact that there has been no warning system in the Indian Ocean

These facts are difficult for the humanist, who believes in the inherent goodness of the human heart, to explain. The question could be asked, how can a good mankind allow such things to happen? Faith in mankind does not seem to have any better answers to the questions than faith in God! The reality is that man's actions lead to greater suffering than any natural disasters. As Rabbi Michael Lerner wrote: "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 non-existent 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.'"

2. Man's humanity to man

Perhaps in the face of this the real question should be how come there has been such a large response to this tsunami in terms of giving aid? If Charles Darwin was right, and we evolved based on the fight to survive, why should people on one side of the world be moved by the suffering of unrelated people on the other side? Surely, logically, we

should just say "I survived, too bad that they didn't". The very fact of that spark of goodness in the human heart is evidence of something more than purely physical, genetic factors in our being. It is evidence for God's creation of mankind.

3. God's revelation to man

The arguments against God ignore the greatest evidence of all for God – the Bible, and the person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Any serious examination of the arguments must look seriously at both.

Towards a Christian Response

So, as Christians look at Jesus – God suffering for us – and this gives us a different perspective on our theology of suffering. In Christ we learn that God is not distant from our suffering, but that He identified with us, with the ultimate aim of redeeming and saving us from sin in its power and consequences. However, that knowledge does not remove the very real pain and bewilderment of situations like this, and as Christians we are not less moved by the suffering of the victims. In fact, if anything, we are more struck because of our deep respect for the sanctity of life. As Kenneth L Woodward writes for *Newsweek*:

even though the acceptance of suffering is deeply embedded in the Christian world view, the death of so many innocent children alone was an excruciating test of the Christian belief that their God is a God of love.

How, then, should we begin to respond as Christians?

1. We should avoid simplistic theological explanations

The bottom line is that the Bible does not give us any simple answers to the question of why disasters, either at a personal scale or a global scale, happen. Garth George, writing in *the New Zealand Herald*, says the question is a "silly" one "because mankind has been asking it since time immemorial every time something nasty happens and no one has ever been able to give a satisfactory answer". By giving trite, empty answers to the "why" question we diminish the suffering of the individuals who were indiscriminately caught up in the disaster.

We should also be careful about trying to explain why this specific disaster happened in this specific location to these specific people. Yes, there are examples in the Bible where it is clear that God judged or moved in a "natural disaster" (the great Flood is a prime example), but the Bible specifically tells us that. God has not told us about every event that has or will happen, and it really isn't our business to make pronouncements about why. Likewise, it is true to say Biblically that all death and suffering is the result of human sin in the global sense, but it is impossible to draw up from Scripture a list of criteria to determine whether a specific event or specific suffering is directly the result of the sin of an individual. In fact, Christ pointed us away from this kind of speculation in John 8 in the case of the man born blind – instead He focuses our attention on the question "What next?" or "What can come out of this terrible situation?". As Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary says, "We must speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where Scripture is silent. Christians must avoid offering explanations when God has not revealed an explanation." I doubt if knowing the reasons **why** this happened would not remove the pain, even if it **were** possible for us to know. But, if there are answers, God has not given them to us, and it seems that our minds are not big enough to figure them out. At this point we need to stop (as Job had to do) and admit that God is God and we are not.

2. We should see that the Bible message does have relevance

To acknowledge that the Bible does not give specific reasons for this disaster is not to say that it has no relevance in how we should respond. The overall message of the Bible shows that there is hope for our world, even if the sheer destructive power of this world often frightens us and leaves us feeling tiny, powerless, and insecure. The Bible is very clear that the character of God is both perfectly loving and just – and that He has all power and authority. We should not try to deny that balance of truth or make excuses for God. Throughout the Bible there is no suggestion that God intimately directs every

detail of the workings of this universe. In fact, when we read books like Job we are struck by the sheer power of nature, and the fact that God sometimes directs the events on earth, but in other occasions He simply allows them to happen. This does not prove that He is impotent, but simply that in many aspects God has ordained rules or "nature" that govern this universe, and the moments when He intervenes in a "supernatural" way are the exception rather than the rule.

However, in a deeper sense the Bible has great relevance as, "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" (Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham). The Bible and the gospel message bring personal hope for us as individuals if we respond in repentance and faith, and a hope for a new world where there will be no more death. The very imperfection of this world where seemingly meaningless "natural disasters" happen echoes in our hearts with a longing for a perfect world where these things will not happen.

3. We should take our questions and struggles to God

The Bible (especially in books like Psalms and Ecclesiastes) is full of examples of people coming before God with all extremes of feeling. God invites us to come before Him with these raw emotions. He is "big enough" to hear our complaints, and to take our anger. If there is no God, we have nowhere to go with our complaints, no court to appeal to – there can be no meaning at all for this world! It is no easier to respond to a disaster like the tsunami if you believe in a god-less universe – in fact it must be harder! A simple comparison of two psalms written by the same people (the sons of Korah) shows this spectrum of emotion – Psalm 46 pronounces unshakable faith in an immovable God even if the earth quakes, while Psalm 88 expresses unfathomable despair in the face of inexplicable loss to a God who seems not to hear. In fact, Psalm 88 even blames God (see v16)! This is not lack of faith, but faith in the crucible – being tested and refined.

4. We should respond to God in real faith

Faith ultimately rests in the goodness and faithfulness of God. Both psalms – 46 and 88 – are psalms of faith, because both look to God as the only answer, the only hope for life when life is good or bad. As Christians, we believe that God knows all things, and that He ultimately knows best. We can rest in Him even if we don't have all the answers. Real faith is not immune to the events around us, rather it engages with them, is provoked by them, and grows through them. Too often our faith is a comfortable thing, protected by our lack of real engagement with the world, and cushioned by our luxury. As Brian Draper of the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity writes:

It often takes a global catastrophe or personal disaster to rock our individual faith, built, as it frequently is, upon the perilous foundations of personal success and happiness. And yet, in truth, our Christian belief should be tried and tested every time we stand alongside those for whom the world seems a faithless, meaningless place – the orphans, the widows, the poor, the homeless and the hopeless that we are called to serve.

5. We should engage with the suffering and poverty

So, we must respond in love to the needs of those affected by the tsunami. We should devote our lives to reaching this world in all its need – giving all we can, and doing all we can to bring the justice and love to this world of need that Christ brought through His incarnation. As theological lecturer Conrad Gempf states:

A catastrophe like the recent events in the Indian Ocean once again provokes the near constant cry that God is either Good But Not All Powerful or else he is All Powerful but Not Good. But we know that Love sometimes relinquishes power and that Goodness can be far from pleasurable or tame. We know that we don't really understand Love or Good much less God. What we do know is that people are in trouble and we should be helping.

This is the call of Christ on our lives – that we might be incarnational in our living just as He was, and that we might be His instruments of love, compassion and sacrificial service. It is time to awaken and re-dedicate ourselves to His purpose.