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God and the Tsunami–Theology in the Headlines, Part Two

The tragedy unfolding in the Indian Ocean demands the world's attention—and calls for a clear Christian response. In the aftermath of the disaster, some religious leaders suggested that God was simply unable to prevent the tsunamis that destroyed so many lives. Some secularists jumped on the opportunity to argue that the tragedy was further proof that God does not exist. Others simply blamed the earthquake and tidal waves on fate or claimed that God had sent the destruction as punishment for the victims' sins.

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How are we to deal with this? What approach will affirm the full measure of Christian truth while taking the disaster into honest account?

First, a faithful Christian response must affirm the true character and power of God. The Bible leaves no room for doubting either the omnipotence or the benevolence of God. The God of the Bible is not a passive bystander, nor a deistic Creator who has withdrawn from His creation and is simply watching it unfold. Just as creation itself was a trinitarian event, so also the triune God reigns over His creation. There is not one atom or molecule in the entire cosmos that is not under the sovereign rule of God. As the Christian tradition has always affirmed, God's active lordship over the universe is the sole explanation for why the cosmos even holds together.

At the center of this universe is the fundamental fact of the supremacy of Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul argued in Colossians 1:15-17, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." Jesus Christ is the explanatory principle of the universe, and any effort to understand the creation apart from its Creator can lead only to confusion.

Liberal theology attempts to solve this problem by cutting God down to size and removing Him from the equation. Having established a truce with the naturalistic worldview, liberal theology simply accommodates itself to the secular temptation by denying God's active and sovereign rule. In other words, God's goodness is affirmed while His greatness is denied. Process theology does this by putting God within the created order, struggling along with His creation toward maturity. At the popular level, this theological approach was turned into a bestseller several years ago by Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The rabbi simply asserted that God is doing the best He can under the circumstances. He would like to prevent tragedies like cancer, hurricanes, and earthquakes from happening—He is simply unable to do so.

This is not the God who revealed Himself in the Bible. God's omnipotence is clearly revealed and unconditionally asserted. At the same time, God's goodness is equally affirmed. Christians must point to these conjoined truths as the very basis for our confidence that life is worth living and that God is ultimately in control of the universe.

Second, we must avoid attempting to explain what God has not explained. In the end, the Christian knows that all suffering—indeed every experience of life—is meaningful. We understand that God is revealing Himself in every moment

of our existence. We also know that all suffering is ultimately caused by sin. That's about as politically incorrect an assertion as we can now imagine—but it is profoundly true. Even so, we must be very careful in how we present this truth. In the Gospel of John [John 9:1-7] Jesus and His disciples were confronted with a man blind from birth. His disciples, posing the conventional question of their day, asked Jesus: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" Jesus responded that it was neither the sin of this man nor the sin of his parents that explained his blindness; rather, "It was so that the works of God might be displayed in him." In other words, Jesus boldly explained that this man was born blind so that in the miracle Jesus was about to perform, his restored sight would be evidence of the dawning of the Kingdom and of the glory of God.

Armed with this knowledge, we must be very circumspect in assigning blame for natural evil. Were the people of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India more sinful than all others? Did God send this tsunami because of the paganisms so prevalent in South Asia? Martin Kettle posed an interesting observation: "Certainly the giant waves generated by the quake made no attempt to differentiate between the religions of those whom it made its victims. Hindus were swept away in India, Muslims were carried off in Indonesia, Buddhists in Thailand. Visiting Christians and Jews received no special treatment either."

We are in absolutely no position to argue that there is no link between human sin and this awful tragedy. The Bible makes clear that God sometimes does respond to specific sin with cataclysmic natural disaster. Just ask the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. Nevertheless, in the Bible's book most centrally concerned with the issue of suffering, it is Job's friends, who tried to offer detailed theological explanations, who end up looking foolish—and worse. Job himself was censured by God for "darkened counsel by words without knowledge." In the end, Job is vindicated by God's grace and mercy, and Job can only respond, "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know. . . . I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes." Job's humility should serve as a model for our own.

As the Apostle Paul reminds us, the judgments of God are unsearchable and unfathomable [Romans 11:33]. Unless God reveals the purpose of His acts and the working of His will among us, we would do well to affirm His sovereignty and goodness, while holding back from placing blame on human agents for disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes.

At the same time, the Bible is clear that sin is the fundamental explanation for these awful disasters. Not sin that is immediately traceable to one individual or another, or even to a specific culture, but the sin that is so clearly indicted in the biblical account of the Fall. According to Genesis chapter 3, Adam's sin had cosmic implications and effects. The effects of sin are evident all around us, most clearly in the undeniable fact of death. This is why the redemptive work of God in Christ points to a new heaven and a new earth as coming realities. As Paul explains, "We know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." In Revelation 21, we are told of a new heaven and a new earth and of a day when God will wipe away every tear from the eyes of the redeemed, "and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

Third, Christians must respond with the love of Christ and the power of the Gospel. Jesus is our great example in responding to such crises. When confronted with the man born blind, Jesus healed the man and showed the glory of God. In response to the death of Lazarus, Jesus brought life out of death, even as He had mourned with Lazarus' sisters.

While Christians are not empowered to perform similar miracles, we are called to be agents of Christ's love and mercy. Following our Lord's example, we must first mourn with those who mourn. The unspeakable grief and incalculable suffering experienced by literally millions of persons in South Asia should prompt every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ to fervent prayer, concern, generosity, and sympathy.

Relief efforts are now under way, and Christians should be at the forefront of this response. Churches, denominations, and Christian agencies are sending support in the form of food, medical care, reconstruction programs, and other forms of humanitarian assistance. In offering concrete help and assistance, Christians are doing nothing less than following the express command and example of Jesus Christ.

Beyond this, Christians must seize this opportunity to confront this awful disaster with the life-changing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and clothe the naked in the name of Christ. This is a powerful testimony, but acts of compassion must be accompanied by words of conviction. Our answer to

this reality of unspeakable tragedy must be witness to the gospel of unfathomable power—the power to bring life out of death.

Furthermore, we must indeed point to this disaster as only a hint of the cataclysm that is yet to come—the holy judgment of God. On that day, the tidal waves of December 26, 2004 will be understood to have been one of the warnings all humanity should have heeded.

This is no time for Christian equivocation or cowardice. In the face of tragedy and suffering on this scale, we must answer with the full measure of Christian conviction and the undiluted truth of Christianity. In this life, we are not given all the answers to the questions we might pose, but God has given us all that we need to know in order to understand our peril and His provision for us in Christ.

So, let us weep with those who weep, pray for those who suffer, give and go in missions of mercy, and bear bold witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, not only in South Asia, but right here at home.

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