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

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Download date	2026-05-13 06:33:45
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10392/2212

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Monday, January 3, 2005

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?

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 Indian Ocean, 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.

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.

Tomorrow: God and the Tsunami—Theology in the Headlines, Part Two.

