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WAS GOD IN THE TSUNAMI?

Psalm 46; Romans 8:18-28

It was 9:40 in the morning, and already a fine day to be in a city on the coast. Because it was a holy day, thousands of people were at prayer in their houses of worship. Suddenly, a massive earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale struck beneath the ocean floor off shore. Buildings rocked, and houses crashed to the ground. Frightened people ran away from the falling buildings toward the shore, thinking they would be safe there.

40 minutes after the first shockwaves were felt, a different kind of wave hit the city with full force—a tidal wave, a tsunami. Within minutes, thousands of people were drowned immediately or washed out to sea.

Minutes later, a fire swept through the city, devouring virtually everything not already destroyed by the earthquake and tsunami. When the final death toll was taken, 60,000 people died in this city alone.

You might think I am describing what happened in cities like Phuket Thailand on Sunday, December 26, 2004, when an earthquake struck off the coast of the island of Sumatra. Actually, the terrible scene I just described happened on November 1, 1755 in Lisbon, Portugal. Because it was All Saints Day, most of the Catholic population was in church when the terrible trinity of earthquake, tsunami, and fire struck the city. Thousands of worshipers died when a half-dozen cathedrals collapsed into a heap of rubble. All told, over 100,000 people died that

terrible day in Lisbon and surrounding cities and towns.

Europeans were in shock. How could so many people have died even as they worshiped God? Was God angry at them? Was this God's will? Was this God's judgment on a sinful world?

Many turned to a mathematician and philosopher named Leibniz for answers. Leibniz had constructed a "theodicy, or a theological argument that tries to reconcile a loving, all-powerful God with evil and suffering in the world. Leibniz claimed that God had created the best of all worlds if human beings were to remain free, and the best God could do was carefully balance out the pain and pleasure of this world with mathematical precision.¹

The French philosopher Voltaire had a field day with Leibniz' theodicy after the deadly earthquake and tsunami in Lisbon. In a savage critique, Voltaire wondered what kind of metaphysical math could possibly justify the death of thousands upon thousands of innocent people, many of them children.*

The impact of the Lisbon tsunami and Voltaire's critique was devastating. Some have said the Christian faith of the Western world (or at least Western Europe) has never recovered. The Lisbon earthquake and tsunami made it look like either God had disappeared, or worse yet never existed, because after all, a loving, all-powerful God would stop things like earthquakes and tidal waves. As one theologian put it, "What's the point of saying 'The heavens declare the glory of God' if tidal waves declare his incompetence?" *

Now, 250 years later, the whole world is asking a similar question. There are some differences, of course, between Lisbon in 1755 and Sri Lanka in 2005. The death toll from the earthquake and tsunami that hit countries bounded by the Indian

See David Hart, "Tremors of Doubt", *The Wall Street Journal*, P. W11, 12/31/04. See Bishop of Durham Tom Wright's comments in "Tsunami Web log" on *Christianity Today* website.

Ocean are 150,000 and climbing. And thanks to the Internet, not just people in the affected areas, but the whole world is talking about it. If you type in the words, “God and tsunami” on your Google search engine, you’ll find more than 3 million entries. The interesting thing is—many of these entries deal not with the scientific explanation of the tsunami or the relief efforts, but the theological questions the tsunami has produced. Manya Bratcher of the *Chicago Tribune* has written, “Not only did the tsunami devastate southern Asia, it challenged its soul.”

In truth, the tsunami has challenged the soul of the entire world. A “Tsunami Web log” compiled by Rob Moll and Ted Olsen on the *Christianity Today* website says, “Supernatural causation and divine culpability are the hottest debates coming out of the Indian Ocean devastation.” In other words, the whole world is now asking the questions western Europeans asked in 1755. In a sense, the very God we worship is on trial all over the world.

The God in question is what theologians call an “interventionist” God.* Not all versions of God are in trouble. Of course, atheists are off the hook because they don’t believe in God in the first place, so the deaths of innocent people are just more random acts in a meaningless world. Even though Deists believe in God they are off the hook because their God created the world and then walked away, leaving the world to its own devices. A variation of the Deistic God is Rabbi Harold Kushner’s loving but limited God who would gladly save people from earthquakes and tsunamis, but just doesn’t have the power to do it. That’s why bad things happen to good people.

The God under the gun at the moment is the all-powerful God of scripture who intervenes in the affairs of people when he has a mind to. He divides a sea to help his beloved Israelites escape Egyptian bondage, and showers them with manna from

heaven when they get hungri²y. Through Jesus he heals the sick, calms angry seas, feeds the hungry, and even raises people from the dead.

So why didn't this same interventionist God save the Portuguese in 1755, or the Indonesians in 2004? By the way, what makes matters worse in this case is you can't blame people for this evil (although there are some who try). You can explain the disaster of 9-11 as the product of sinful people acting freely. But earthquakes and tsunamis are products of an impersonal nature created and controlled by God.

As one news columnist puts it, "God, if there is a God, should be ashamed of himself. The sheer enormity of the Asian tsunami disaster, the death, the destruction, and havoc it has wreaked, the scale of misery it has caused, must surely test the faith of even the firmest believer. I hope there is no God. For if there were, then he'd have to shoulder the blame. In my book, he'd be as guilty as sin and I would want nothing to do with him." *

Friends, whether we realize it or not, people all over the world are questioning the God we serve. How do we answer the charges that God is either doesn't exist, or doesn't care, or doesn't have the power to intervene, or all of the above? Or to put it more bluntly, what do we say to the man who lost everyone and thing in the tsunami and then shouted through his tears, "There is nothing! There is nothing! Where is God? What is God?"

For the record, we need to note that Christianity is not the only religion struggling with these issues. Most people in southern Asia are not Christian, but something else. Buddhists have said bad karma built up from human transgressions may have contributed to this disaster. Hindus have also seen this disaster as punishment for misdeeds, while Muslims have understood the devastation to be a test

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Allan Laing in *The Glasgow (Scotland) Herald*, as quoted by Tsunami Web log on *Christianity Today* website

of faith.

But what have Americans, including American Christians been saying? One Internet website called “beliefnet.com” has been running a poll that asks people to respond to the following question: “Does God have a role in natural disasters like the tsunami?” The last time I checked the poll, here’s what it said:

“Yes, God is punishing us.” 3%

“Yes, God is testing us.” 8%

“Yes, the earthquake and tsunamis were sent by God, but we don’t know what the purpose was.” 30%

“Although I believe in God, the supernatural had nothing to do with this tragedy.” 49%

“God doesn’t exist, and disasters like these are just forces of nature.” 9%

As usual, the media has focused lots of attention on the extremes. One Christian website says the tsunamis are punishment for countries that persecute Christians. Another says thousands of vacationing Swedes died because of sexual immorality in Sweden. Another says the earthquake and tsunami are dead giveaways (no pun intended) that the Rapture is just around the corner.

Frankly, I think responses like these do our witness more harm than good. I prefer answers like that of David Hart, who says the first response of every thoughtful Christian to this tragedy will be grief, followed by a respectful silence. This is no time, Hart says, for Christians to shoot from the hip with quick judgments or pious platitudes. We need to be honest about the mystery that engulfs the horrific death of 150,000+ people, and not claim to know more than we know, and especially not claim to know more than the Bible knows.

And what does the Bible say about these hard questions? While the Bible never offers a clear-cut answer to suffering, it is quite clear and very realistic about the world we live in. Yes, the Bible says *The heavens declare the glory of God* (Psalm 19:1). But the scripture also says we live in a fallen world where both people and nature are twisted and broken by sin. In ways that we cannot understand, the sin of Adam and Eve and collective humanity has set loose destructive forces that operate in the natural world. Why are innocent people killed by cancer and tornadoes and tsunamis? Because, to paraphrase Paul, creation is in bondage to decay. Indeed, Paul says, *the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth, right up to this present time.*

What does that mean? It means all of us, even the most saintly, are incredibly fragile, vulnerable creatures. Tomorrow, it could be our turn to contract multiple sclerosis or cancer. Tomorrow, because it *rains on the just and the unjust*, it could be our turn to suffer a mudslide, or an avalanche, or an earthquake.

Was God in the tsunami? No, not if you mean God caused the tsunami. But God created the world that in turn was tainted and twisted by our sin that in turn occasionally convulses with earthquakes and causes tsunamis.

The Bible also reminds us that it is okay to express our feelings of grief and even anger in the face of the mystery of suffering. Well-meaning Christians often say faithful believers will never question God and will always act like life is good, no matter what. I'm sorry, but the Bible just doesn't agree with that sentiment. Remember that no less than David, a man after God's own heart, cries out in Psalm 22, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* And remember, Jesus Christ, Son of David and divine Son of God, repeats those same mournful words as he hangs on the cross.

In times like these, you are not being irreverent to ask God, "Why," and to

lament the seeming absence of God. God can take even our stiffest questions and sternest rebukes. In the meantime, as John Ortberg reminds us*, it is incumbent upon us to believe *to mourn with those who mourn*. When Paul offers this command in Romans 12:15, he doesn't go on to say, "And be sure to explain away all the suffering." No, there is a time to mourn and cry with others, without offering simple explanations.

And remember God also mourns with those who mourn. God suffers with us. This is one of several messages for us from Psalm 46. What better words can we hear just now than these:

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed and the mountains be cast
into the midst of the sea.*

*Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake
with the trembling thereof.*

There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God.

Now of course, the city the Psalmist is talking about is Jerusalem. And if you've ever been to Jerusalem, you know no river runs through it. What river is the Psalmist talking about? He's talking about the presence of God, a tidal wave of the Spirit that flows around us and through us, no matter what. And that sustaining presence will hold us up even if the world caves in on top of us, because ultimately, *God works for the good of those who love him*, and in the end, not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

In the meantime, God's presence can be seen in the tsunami of aid that is flowing toward southern Asia. If this were nothing but a God-forsaken, dog-eat-dog world, utterly devoid of meaning, how do you explain that fact that people all over the world, including American Christians, are sending millions of dollars of aid to Muslims

in Indonesia, and³ Hindus in India?

You see, at the end of the day, I think what will mean more to the world is not the perfect answer to the question of suffering, but a compassionate response to the pain of suffering. That's why I am asking you today to reach down deep in your pockets and give generously to help these people.

No, we can't do everything. We can't undo the damage in Sri Lanka, or stop the genocide in Rwanda, or instantly solve all the problems with malnutrition and disease that kill 29,000 children a day*. But with God as our helper, we can love our neighbors in Southern Asia with our gifts, and trust God to do the rest.

Was God in the tsunami? I don't think so.

Is God in tsunami relief? Absolutely! Now, let's make the presence of God clear as day to all the world through what we give and do.

See Rabbi Michael Lerner's comments in Tsunami Web log posted on *Christianity Today's* Website.