

GOD AND THE TSUNAMI

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The most catastrophic event in recent memory is the giant earthquake that erupted under the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, caused by the movement of two tectonic plates four thousand fathoms under the surface of the sea. Registering 9.0 on the Richter scale, this two-hundred megaton jolt thrust up a giant wave a hundred feet high that raced at nearly five-hundred miles an hour to devastate 3,000 miles of unprotected shoreline. Saturation media coverage makes it unnecessary to dwell here on the carnage that has already caused 300,000 deaths, 250,000 of them in Indonesia alone. Instead, we focus on the profound religious issues raised by the sheer arbitrariness of the disaster. Since tsunamis do not play politics, there are no enemy terrorists to blame, so does that make God the culprit?

Efforts to explain the divine role in such calamities leave much to be desired. As might be expected, some were ready with theories of retribution: one popular author covered all the bases by insisting that God was punishing our enemies for persecuting Christians and punishing us for our moral laxity as a wake-up call to repent. To critics challenging the severity of his verdict, he retorted, "You ought to see what hell is like. It's going to be an eternal judgment of God on all people."¹ Others have used scriptural descriptions of upheavals in nature (Matthew 24:7-8; Luke 21:25-26) to view the tsunami as a sign of the last days when the rewards of heaven will more than compensate us for the severe trials which we must endure here on earth. However, to explain the tragedy in terms either of heaven or of hell leaves it a mystery that will

¹ Henry Blackaby cited by *BP News*, January 24, 2005. For commentary on such "explanations" see Bob Terry, "Simply Unexplainable," *The Alabama Baptist*, February 10, 2005, p. 2.

not be solved until we reach eternity, thereby diverting our attention from responses which are urgently needed in the present.

The concern prompting this sermon is that, if we as Christians refuse to face head-on the hard questions that arise whenever nature becomes our enemy, that very denial of the problem will create a dark closet of doubt within the house of faith. After all, we are endlessly threatened, not only by earthquakes, but by floods, tornados, landslides, and plagues. It is the mega-scourges that get media attention, but our heartbreaking dilemma is mirrored in the face of one tiny baby dying of leukemia. What do we say when nature seems not only capricious and cruel but downright callous about those whom it hurts the most? As Christians we make some very strong claims about the essential goodness of our world as a gift of God. But how can we sing "For the Beauty of the Earth" on beaches littered with rotting corpses? Let us honor the dead by grappling with the tough issues raised by those terrible realities that cost them their lives.

I. The Creator

The religious questions being raised about the tsunami fall into a predictable pattern which has surfaced many times in the past. First, "How could God allow such a terrible thing to happen?," and, second, "Where was God when it happened?" The assumption is that, if God is all-loving, he would not permit such a cataclysm to occur; and, if he all-powerful, he would act to prevent any other force from causing it to occur. Since the Christian faith insists that God is intimately concerned with each individual life (Matthew 10:29-31), we cannot assume that he was indifferent or detached like the Deist god of the Enlightenment. If we have no answers to these questions, does this imply either that God is vindictive rather than loving, or that he is weak rather than strong, or that he is absent rather than present with us? Clearly the tsunami calls into question our most fundamental understanding of God.

Let us begin with the issue of power. Many simply assume that God, by definition, is in charge of everything that happens. We like to use the “omni”- words, stressing that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. When we shift out of that philosophical framework, we often speak of God as sovereign, almighty, and majestic. Or as one theologian put it, “God is in control of the entire universe, and there is not even a single atom outside His sovereignty”² Descriptions of God’s absolute power abound which assume that he could immediately halt the most ferocious storm if he so desired. Sometimes it seems as if Christians are in a contest to claim more for their God than other religions claim for theirs, which causes us to insist that our God can do anything he pleases.

Let me trouble you to think about whether this is the best way to understand the greatness of God. Obviously God cannot do anything that is inherently impossible or contradictory, such as make a rock so heavy that he cannot pick it up. More important is the recognition that God can act only consistent with his character. Thus, for example, God cannot sin or do anything that would be ungodly, which puts off-limits to him many things that we do. According to the Bible, the holiness of God means that he is unique, radically different from us in what he thinks and does (Isaiah 55:8-9). To say that God can act only for good does not mean that he is restrained by some power greater than himself, but rather that he chooses to limit his power by his perfection. In short, God is *not* free to *not* be God!

Now let us look more closely at the common platitude that God is all-loving. We all know that the word “love” has great latitude, which is well expressed by acknowledging that we “love” our God, our country, our family, as well as cold watermelon and our favorite flavor of ice cream. One kind of love can easily become self-gratifying, as when a lad whispers to his date in the moonlight, “I love you, I love you,” but what he really means is, “I love me and I want

² R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “God and the Tsunami: Theology in the Headlines,” Crosswalk.com, January 3-4, 2005.

you.” Another kind of love can lead to a pampering of the beloved that results in their corruption. All of us know parents who coddle their children until, like bad fruit, they become “spoiled.” Love can be so smotheringly possessive that the beloved is crushed by its embrace.

In the Bible, God is pictured as having a very distinctive kind of love that is different from our own, so much so that it required a new word to describe it. This *agapē* is what we might call “tough love,” sacrificial rather than selfish or smothering in nature. By the time of the Apostle Paul, the followers of Jesus came to realize that it was redemptive love because it was causing them to grow toward maturity (Ephesians 3:14-19; 4:13-15). The central truth of the New Testament is that the nature of God was most fully revealed by Christ’s death on the cross, which represented a revolution in our understanding of just how vulnerable his love was willing to be on our behalf (Philippians 2:6-11).

When we combine these insights regarding God’s power and love and apply them to his role as creator of the universe, we begin to understand why God did not fashion earth as a perfect planet that never changes, a place where there are no germs or snakes or hurricanes. God did not make a robot world for the same reason that he did not make robot people to inhabit it, namely, because such a world would leave no room for choices, for growth, for the achievement of maturity. Trapped in a world of total predictability, we would be forced to bow to the inevitability of the way things always are.

Theoretically, it might seem easier to live in a perfect world where nothing ever goes wrong, but such a world would deny us the most precious dimension of our humanity, namely, our freedom, the freedom to decide what to believe and who to love and how to relate to the world about us. Think of the parents who do everything possible to create a perfect world for their children only to watch them grow up unable to cope with the harsh realities of human existence. There is no maturity without freedom and no freedom without risk. That is why God

chose to use his power on the hardest task of all: to love us in such a way that we will freely choose to love in mature fashion. So let us begin to think about the kind of world where responsible freedom is encouraged.

II. The Creation

Only after we sharpen our understanding of the character of the Creator are we able to ponder what kind of creation is compatible with his nature. Just as we often adopt an absolutist idea of God that puts no limits on the way he uses his power and his love, even so we often entertain a simplistic idea of creation by assuming that God began with a nice clean slate, a perfect emptiness filled only with himself. It is always easier to start like that, in a vacuum with no clutter or carryover from the past. Many of our problems stem from our inability to start from scratch. We lament the legacy that others have left behind but assume that God was not encumbered with such restrictions.

The biblical account in Genesis 1, however, is not so simple. For no sooner does verse 1 declare that God created the earth than verse 2 immediately goes on to say that, before this began to happen, the earth was (1) devoid of form or content, having no shape or substance, no law or order. (2) Furthermore, there was a dark watery void underneath this chaos called "the deep." (3) Again, upon the face of the deep there was a brooding "darkness." And yet God faced down this bleak abyss. The wind of his breath blew across its shadowy face. He moved in to hatch something new like a bird sets on an egg. The creative God came up against the most uncreative, unpromising raw materials imaginable and determined to use them as building blocks for a livable planet earth (Isaiah 45:18).

Such a startling picture of chaos leaves us hungry to speculate about where this amorphous nothingness, this watery emptiness, this overarching blackness came from, but on such issues the text is silent, as is its New Testament counterpart in John 1:5 where the origin of

“darkness” is not explained but simply posited. The key point lies rather in the contrast: verse 2 describes the antithesis of creation, what our world would be like without the creative intervention of God. In other words, creation does not mean making something out of nothing but it means bringing order out of chaos. You do not create a painting simply by gathering oils and brushes. Or create a cathedral by assembling lumber and bricks. These are only raw materials waiting to be transformed. Just so, to say that our world was “created” means more than to say merely that it “exists,” for the former implies design, purpose, and beauty such as God superimposed by gradually sorting out the confusion that confronted him.

It is just here that we come to a second startling biblical insight about creation, namely, that it is unfinished because the nothingness of the void was overcome but not forever banished. Always the possibility of reverting to corruption and disorder lurked in the shadows. In our incredible capacity to choose, we can lay waste to God’s good creation by ravaging its forests, polluting its streams, and fouling its air. The Prophet Jeremiah pictured a relapse of creation to its pre-created chaos (Jeremiah 4:23-26), but God asserted his determination to work within the constraints of our freedom to renew creation and bring it to completion (Jeremiah 4:27-28). That is why Jesus affirmed, not only that God was still engaged in his creative work, but that the Son joined him in that endeavor (John 5:17). His miracles, for example, restored small fragments of creation to their original goodness (compare Genesis 1:31 with Mark 7:37). Indeed, the work of creation will not be completed until there is “a new heaven and a new earth” as envisioned in the last book of the Bible (Revelation 21:1).

It is just here that we need to turn aside for a moment and reflect on the meaning of evolution which has become so controversial in contemporary religious life. To be sure, there are those who would use an extreme view of scientific or social Darwinism to discredit the Christian faith, but the growing evidence for a vast process of evolution over billions of years, if

understood properly, may actually enhance our understanding of creation. For what it means is that there is an amazing drive toward order, purpose, and wholeness built into the very way that things are made. There was a time when our planet was little more than an uninhabitable mass of fiery magma endlessly pummeled by celestial meteors. Why should this utterly unpromising beginning lead eventually, not only to animal and human life, but to intelligence and community, even to goodness and beauty, rather than collapsing into a meaningless jumble?

There are few places to see the work of the creator God more clearly than in the millions upon millions of ways in which nature has decided, in the use of its own God-given freedom, to grow to the point of development it has now reached. And why should these choices that the evolutionists call “natural selection” result in such purposeful progress except that this was the direction that God intended from the beginning? Clearly nature’s quest for harmony and balance is not yet complete, which is why the tectonic plates that have been grinding against one another for some three billion years may still overlap in ways that cause unintended disasters. But the improvements made thus far are breathtaking if only we will stop to behold them.

III. The Creature

At last we are in a position to ask what it might mean for us to live in the kind of world just described. Obviously it is an unfinished creation just as we are unfinished creatures. Despite enormous progress, the world is just as broken as we are, thus there is much work yet to be done. Meanwhile, the lurking void reminds us of just how finite, vulnerable, and thus necessarily interdependent we really are. Life is a hazardous venture at best, not only because we cannot predict what may happen next in nature, but also because we cannot predict what may happen next in the human heart. The only way to cope with the many contingences that belong both to the freedom of nature and to the freedom of humanity is to be prepared for the worst but committed to work with God for the best in completing his “new creation.”

It may sound audacious to suggest that God has invited us to help him tame the chaos, to literally be co-creators with him in making a better world, but that is precisely why he has endowed us with what we call “creativity,” which means exactly what it says, namely, the capacity to make things new and better! Why would God ask us to “subdue” the earth and “have dominion” over it (Genesis 1:28) unless he had fitted us for that very task? Unfortunately, many Christians have a vague and weak doctrine of creation which leaves them indifferent to the plight of nature. What is needed is an attitudinal change according to which it becomes an overriding passion of us all to leave the world better than we found it. It is a scandal that some environmentalists who have no God are more actively involved in the care of the earth than are some Christians who claim to worship its creator!

To take seriously our role in helping creation attain its full potential is to honor science and technology for the great strides made in understanding how the physical world works and what its most pressing needs might be. Specifically regarding the recent tsunami, only since the 1960s have seismologists begun to understand the workings of tectonic plates and therefore gained the ability to predict well in advance when disasters may occur. In this case, several hours of warning time were available but no alarm systems were in place despite the fact that they utilize a simple technology which has been in existence for almost a century.

Third World countries often plead the excuse of poverty for their neglect when the problem is really one of priority, most of them spending far more on weapons of destruction than it would cost to install an early warning system able to alert their citizens to danger. If we but have the will to do it, we can make this world a much safer place in which to live instead of squandering our ingenuity and resources on that which can only destroy life and fracture its habitat. That is precisely the kind of choice that God gave us: “I call heaven and earth to

witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore *choose life* that you and your descendents may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

To be sure, this will not be a quick or easy task and, in our petulance, we whine at God for not having already done our work for us. But remember, God himself has been working on behalf of our world for a lot longer than we have. At the outset, he spread his labors over six days rather than commanding an instantaneous creation that would be complete from the outset. Instead of pulling the world out of a hat full blown, God followed a gradual progression, an orderly sequence, a purposeful process that has evolved to the present day. We must infer from this approach that he “took his time” because the kind of creativity that honors freedom takes patience even for God. If God never gives up in his efforts to create something worthwhile, if he is willing to work one step at a time, who are we to refuse to join him in that task?

The fact that the job is not finished, either for God or for us, does not mean that he has consigned us to live with a succession of tragedies as acts of judgment, punishment, or warning. Rather, he has joined us in the struggle and made himself vulnerable to their impact. In the magnificent eighth chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote of the emptiness, brokenness, and sense of futility that haunts the whole created order (v. 20). No one could have painted the tragic dimension of life on a vaster canvas than did Paul in his personification of every part of creation joining together in a common chorus of cries. But he moved swiftly to interpret this writhing as the travail of an expectant mother about to bring forth her most cherished hope (v. 22b). The spasms that convulse life are but the labor pains by which the creation is struggling to “be set free . . . and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God” (v. 21).

Paul’s key word in this passage is “groaning” which he attributes not only to creation but to the Christian community as we share creation’s ordeal (v. 23) and to the divine Comforter who intercedes on our behalf with “groanings too deep for words” (v. 26). Herein lies our

ultimate hope for the transformation of tragedy, not that we have discovered a neat theodicy which somehow “explains” the problem of suffering, but that we have experienced the sovereign God striving with us “in all things” until he once again makes them “good” (v. 28).

So, to answer directly the question, “Where was God when the tsunami struck?,” he was on every mile of those battered beaches weeping with those who wept, groaning for the day when nature and all of its inhabitants will know a better world in which to live. As a child of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionaries working in the area put it:

When wave upon wave of water hit shores thousands of miles from where they began, You were there.

When these waves crashed away everything in their path,
You were there.

When the people You loved enough to die for ran for their very lives, You were there.

When houses fell and possessions were swept away, You were there.

You saw as these waves broke buildings, stole lives, left terror and grief in their wake.

Did Your heart break? I don't have to ask.

I imagine Your tears would put the waters of tsunamis to shame.

In the midst of death and destruction, the God of the Universe was there. You were there.³

³“He was There: A Personal Reflection,” *CBF Fellowship!*, February/March, 2005, p. 3.