

A RESPONSE TO TRAGEDY

By Mark Conner (Jan '05)

On the morning of December 26th, 2004 a massive undersea earthquake (9.0 on the Richter scale) set off destructive tsunami waves in the Asian region at the north of Indonesia. In the ensuing hours and days, over 150,000 people were killed from 12 different countries and millions of people were without homes. We have all been stunned by the heartbreaking images we have seen on TV and the stories we have read in newspapers. It's hard to comprehend the incredible horror and grief that millions of people are experiencing around the world at this time.

Unlike the terrorist attacks of September 11th a few years back, this tragedy was not caused by the actions of failure of people (what we call 'human evil'). This is what's referred to as a 'natural disaster'. This kind of 'natural evil' raises all sorts of questions about God, death and suffering. "If God is all-powerful and loving, why did he allow this?" As Christians, what do we say about this? How do we respond? What is going on?

These questions have been asked and discussed by people throughout the centuries and I'm not here to tell you I have all the answers. It would be presumptuous of any of us to think we could completely resolve the paradox of suffering (technically called 'theodicy') in a way that answers every question adequately. Nevertheless, there are a few principles that I believe can help us as we think about the current crisis.

Five Affirmations (my personal beliefs)

1. Nature is in a broken state (Gen 3:17-18)

We live in a fallen world and this often results in human suffering (for both Christians and non-Christians). Some people escape and others don't. Every day people somewhere in the world have to deal with the effect of sickness, misfortune and death. This includes natural disasters – whether in the form of an earthquake, a tornado, a volcano erupting, a landslide, a flood or a bushfire

When Adam and Eve sinned thousands of years ago, there was a curse placed on the earth. Everything was thrown out of balance, including nature itself (seen in the thorns and thistles growing). All of creation is groaning and hoping to one day be redeemed (Rom 8:19-21). We are all impacted by the effects of this fact. Obviously, this recent tsunami grabs everyone's attention because of the size and scope of its destruction of human life.

2. God is still in control (Psalm 135:6-7)

So, did God directly cause this tsunami and if so, why? Or does God just sit back and let things happen allowing nature to be independent of his involvement?

There is no doubt that there are natural disasters that God does not directly cause but that he obviously allows. Often these affect both sinful and innocent people. So, though God may not always be the 'primary cause' (the devil, people or nature

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may be this), he is always at least the 'secondary cause' in that He allows things to happen or not. The calamities that happened to Job are an example of this.

Either way, God, as the creator of the world, is sovereign and rules over all. God is not an absent bystander during natural disasters. Things do not just happen. If nature is out of God's hands, then our lives are out of God's hands.

3. Disasters provide opportunity for compassionate care and for sharing the good news about Jesus Christ.

Our response should be one of empathy, concern and loving action. During times of crisis, relationships become essential. Human vulnerability is usually high and heartfelt concern can help people through their trauma. We are to weep with those who weep and be a source of comfort to them during their suffering. We are to do good towards all people – especially in the midst of suffering. In doing so, we show Christ's love/

It has been inspiring to see the generosity of so many people – the government of Australia, the wider community and of course, so many Christians. Our own church congregation has given over \$60,000 towards a disaster project in Aceh, one of the hardest hit regions. This is commendable.

4. God is seeking to get the world's attention

There is a purpose in everything that happens. Nothing is by accident or chance. There is always a reason, even when it can be difficult to discern. What is God saying through a natural disaster such as this?

In Jesus time, there were tragedies that took place (see Luke 13:1-5). Pilate killed a number of Galileans and mixed their blood with sacrifices ('human evil') collapsed with ('natural evil'). Jesus addressed these two current issues but he didn't explain 'why' they had happened. What he did say, however, was insightful. He said, 'do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were guiltier than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you too repent, you too will all perish.'

Jesus makes it clear that when something bad happens it doesn't mean that the person/s affected by suffering is necessarily sinful or evil. Good and evil does not fall on people in some sort of vindictive manner. Final rewards and punishments are not given out in this life. The bible teaches that the righteous often endure suffering and calamities while sometimes the wicked seemed to be blessed. Like Job, we have to learn to accept both good and trouble from God, then trust in his providence (Job 2:9-10). God always acts from the stand point of eternity and we need to live our lives from that perspective as well.

We can't fully understand all that God has in His mind, but there are always a few messages that we should be quick to learn:

a. Death is inevitable. We are not powerful. We are mortal, and in due time, every person will die. In fact, any of us could die without warning. It's not a matter of 'if' but of 'when'. If no lives had been lost through the tsunami, they all would have died at sometime in the future (natural disasters do not increase death). Yes, that is morbid thought, but it is the truth. All of us have to come to terms with death. It is inevitable and inescapable. When faced with

death we begin to realise how short and frail life is and we begin to clarify what our values and priorities really are. Like it or not, this is a positive thing.

- b. Judgement is coming. All of the world is under judgement of God because of our rebellion. The judgements of God are already in the earth and they will increase (including natural disasters) as we near the time of end, before the return of Jesus Christ (see Matt 24:7-8). Paul tells us to consider both the 'kindness and sternness of God' (Romans 11:22). Like God, nature can also be both kind and stern.
 - c. Through repentance we can escape judgement. Death is not the end. It brings us to a time of accountability as we will each stand before God. By acknowledging our need of God and turning to Jesus as our forgiver and leader now, we can be assured of eternal life and Gods ultimate blessing. Jesus' marriage is still relevant today, 'unless you repent, you will perish!'
5. God identifies with our suffering.

God is merciful, loving and long suffering. In his most profound display of grace imaginable, he stepping into our shoes as a man, God the son, and then suffered and died as our substitute, so that we could be forgiven and accepted by God – all through faith.

He is not callous towards suffering. He understands because he has suffered himself, dying a cruel agonising death on the cross. As another example, when Lazarus died, Jesus knew that he was going to raise him from the dead but when he arrived he still wept with those who were grieving. Jesus weeps in our pain, despite the fact that he sees the bigger perspective.

Whatever you're going through right now (loss of loved one, personal pain, grief, etc), he sees, he understands and he cares for you. His grace, comfort and strength are available to your right now. Call out to him in prayer.

If these five affirmations don't answer every question but they do help me come to grips with this tragedy. I hope they are of some help to you too.