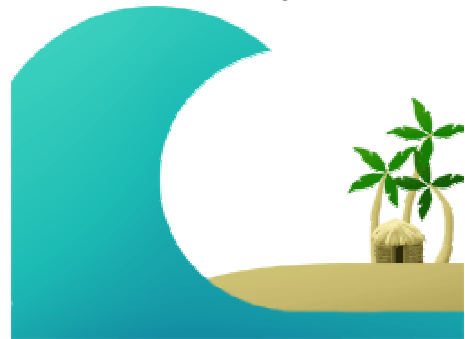


Who Sent the Earthquake and the Tsunami?

by Nollie Malabuyo

The South Asia disaster of December 26, 2004, says a Hindu, was caused by “huge pent-up man-made evil on earth and the positions of the planets.” “The world,” agrees a Jewish rabbi, “is being punished for wrongdoing.” A Muslim disagrees, saying, “It has nothing to do with God punishing evil, otherwise, why doesn't God punish evil in other places?” An Episcopalian bishop concurs with the Muslim, saying “God doesn't choose who's going to live and who's going to die,” and he is “in no way responsible for what happened.” And a Buddhist monk is philosophical: “This is how nature works, it is like a cycle. From time to time these things happen. We never know where it happens.”¹

Since the first man Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, mankind has sought to answer some of life's most difficult questions: Why do disasters happen? If God is a good God, why is there suffering in this world? Why me? These age-old questions come to the forefront again after the South Asia earthquake-tsunami disaster. Christians of course answer with an affirmation of God's sovereignty. But some of us ask, Is God sovereign only over good, and not over evil? Others, like Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, suggest that we should not seek for answers, but only to be involved in a “passionate engagement with the lives that are left” and to seek “ways of changing the situation.”² But what does the Bible say?



God's Providential Care Of His Creation

The Bible affirms God's absolute, sovereign rule and control over all creation. This is so because he has decreed, before the creation of the world, “the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done” (Isa. 46:10). After he created the universe, God did not just let it spin unhindered on its own course, and only intervenes at times so he can accomplish his purpose. Rather, God, in his providence, is *always* involved in its affairs: he *preserves* it, he *governs* it, and he *causes all his creatures to act precisely so that his will is done*.

God continuously upholds his creation, and creation only endures through his preservation (Neh. 9:6; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). He gives life to all his creatures (Acts 17:28), and “gives food to all flesh” (Psa. 136:25). God also guides man to act according to his purpose, “fashion[ing] the hearts of men” (Psa. 22:13-15), even turning the king's heart “wherever he will” (Prov. 21:1). And lastly, God also rules over all his creation as the King of the universe (Psa. 22:28; 103:19; Dan. 4:34,35; 1Tim. 6:15). He controls the courses of the sun and the moon (Psa. 104:19; Jer. 31:35), and determines when each sparrow will fall to the ground (Matt. 10:29). He calls each one of the billions of stars by name (Isa. 40:26), numbers each hair on our heads (Matt. 29:30), and directs each lightning's target (Job 36:32). Even decisions made by casting lots, seemingly by chance, are determined by God (Prov. 16:33).

The Bible also teaches that God works in every act of His creatures – whether good or evil. Does this make God responsible for man's sinful deeds? Of course not, because God, in his perfect holiness, cannot sin (Num. 23:19; 1 Pet. 1:16). He wills not only the good deeds of men (Phil. 2:13), but also their evil deeds (Acts 14:16). He uses man's willful sins to accomplish his purpose in

¹ CBSNews.com, “Religions Try To Explain Tsunamis,” January 7, 2005, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/01/06/eveningnews/main665307.shtml>.

² Rowan Williams, “Of course this makes us doubt God's existence,” January 2, 2005, *The Daily Telegraph* Online, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2005/01/02/do0201.xml>.

saving his people: through Joseph's brothers (Gen. 50:20), through Pharaoh of Egypt (Exod. 14:17), and through the Jews who killed Jesus (Acts 2:23). God's sovereignty and human responsibility is a paradox that belongs to the realm of "the secret things" of God (Deut. 29:29).

God's Providential Control Over Evil

But most incomprehensible to man is the fact that God's almighty power not only blesses him with peace, prosperity, and health, but also afflicts him with wars, disasters, and diseases. He sent the Babylonians to fight and destroy Israel (Hab. 1:5-11). He destroyed the whole earth with a flood (Gen. 7:23), and reduced Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes with fire from heaven (Gen. 19:24). He causes earthquakes (Psa. 60:2), storms (Psa. 83:15; 89:9; 107:25), famines (Gen. 41:28-30; Jer. 14:11-12), pestilence (Exod. 9:15), and disasters on the earth (Psalm 46:8; Amos 3:6). God summarizes all these in Isaiah 45:7, "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity." Thus, when a great disaster like the South Asia earthquake-tsunami strikes, Christians must acknowledge that God's sovereign, almighty power is at work.

But doesn't Satan, not solely God, also cause disasters, as when he sent brigands, fire, storm, and disease to take away the health, wealth, and the children of Job (Job 1:6-19), a man who was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil?" (Job 1:1, 8)? Yes, Satan did, and still does. But he can do so only by God's consent, and within limits set by God (Job 1:12). Moreover, at Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, he exchanged places with Satan: Christ conquered death (1 Cor. 15:54-56) and ascended into heaven, while Satan was thrown out of heaven (John 12:31-32; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 12:9) into the "abyss" of death (Rev. 9:1-6), and bound "so that he might not deceive the nations any longer" (Rev. 20:3; Mark 3:27). The devil is still "blind[ing] the minds of the unbelievers" (2 Cor. 4:4) and "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8), but God does not allow him to deceive people and nations *en masse* as he did before Christ came.

If Satan is not the cause of great disasters on earth, and God is, then what is God's purpose in bringing destruction to people? The Bible says that God is a holy, righteous God who does not tolerate sin. But even though sin, at times, is the obvious reason for afflictions, this does not mean that in all cases of affliction, sin is the cause. In fact, most life situations call for silence – we must not point a finger on one's sin when a serious illness strikes, as when Job's friends unjustly did. Jesus' disciples also fell into the same error: they thought that a man who was born blind, or his parents, must have committed a grievous sin that God plagued him with such a miserable condition at birth. But Jesus rebuked them, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, *but that the works of God might be displayed in him*" (John 9:1-3, emphasis added).

Thus, the Christian believer must not hastily conclude that God sent this disaster to South Asian nations because of their Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, or pagan religions. It is certain that there are also Christians (and Jews) among the victims, whether nationals or vacationers. And even more telling is the fact that there are many followers of these non-Christian religions in Western nations today. The effects of a fallen creation do not fall randomly on certain individuals and cultures, but universally, since the *whole creation* is subject to futility and is groaning together in pain (Rom. 8:20-23).

"Does God's Plan Include Many Casualties?"

On the other hand, God frequently warns and punishes wicked men with disasters: "the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry" (Psa. 18:7ff). In Noah's days, when "the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth," he decided to "blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land" with a great flood (Gen. 6:5-7). When the Israelites conquered the Promised Land, God commanded them to completely destroy some of the cities they captured – along with men, women, and children – because those cities were idolatrous (Deut. 7:1-5).

Many Christians today cringe at this idea. Isn't this God of the Old Testament so cruel and unjust as to order the random killing of innocent men, women, children, and even infants? But they forget that no

one is “innocent,” that “none is righteous..., no one understands..., no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12). If God were to send a meteor today to destroy this planet, he would be completely justified in doing so, because “all have sinned,” and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 3:23; 6:23).

Obviously, many will “feel something of a chill at the prospect of a God who deliberately plans a programme that involves a certain level of casualties.”³ Some may waver in their commitment to Christianity; others may even reject the faith. But, as in the great early church persecution, or in the fourteenth century plague that killed one-third of Europeans, the true Christian will always fall back on God's providence and sovereignty. He, and not just “those closest to the cost,” is able to declare “with authority about these terrible matters”⁴ that God is in providential control, and all his decrees are “according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:5-6, emphasis added).

But the believer's confidence in God's sovereignty must also be balanced by fervent prayer, compassion, generous giving, and even participation in the worldwide relief and rebuilding efforts now under way. Christians must encourage churches and missionaries in the disaster regions to accompany their ministries of mercy with the message of Christ's gospel of love, mercy, forgiveness, and transformed lives.

God is Merciful, Gracious, and Slow to Anger

Finally, the message of wars, disasters, and diseases is not only that God is wrathful towards sinful man, but also that God is also “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psa. 103:8; 145:8, 9). When Jonah warned the Ninevites of their impending destruction, they repented of their evil ways, and God spared them from destruction (Jon. 3:10).

Today, “he commands all people everywhere [*not just those affected by the earthquake-tsunami*] to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed” (Acts 17:30-31). Let us not scoff at God's patient call to repent from our sins and to put our faith in his Son Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:9), because earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, famines, and other disasters are only warnings and foretastes of that *coming day of terror* (Matt. 24:7-8). And that *man* who will judge the world is Christ Jesus himself, who on that unknowable day of cosmic and earthly upheavals, will come again “with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:29-31).



Drawing by John Steczynski,
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And to those who repent, take heart! When the world seems to be engulfed in evil, suffering, and upheaval, you have a secure shelter, both in this age, and in the age to come:

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling (Psa. 46:1-3).*

Let this be the message of Christians who are bringing both physical and spiritual comfort to those who are in unspeakable grief and confusion, in Asia as well as in the West.

©January 2005 by Nollie Malabuyo. Mr. Malabuyo is a Wycliffe Bible Translators (www.wycliffe.org) missionary and an M. Div. candidate at Westminster Seminary (www.wscal.edu) in Escondido, California. He quotes Scriptures from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (www.gnpsb.org/home/esv).

³ Williams, “God's existence.”

⁴ Williams, “God's existence.”