

# Centre for Contemporary Ministry

*including Clapham Connections and the Wilberforce Fund*



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## GOD AND THE TSUNAMI

*Is there any word from the Lord?*

Seven days after the destruction that engulfed the coastal plains of Southeast Asia the sea was still disgorging hundreds of bodies onto the beaches across thousands of miles of coastland and tiny islands around the Indian Ocean. Thousands still lay buried and unidentified, while whole villages and coastal towns disappeared from the face of the earth in the greatest single natural tragedy in world history.

The video cameras of tourists recorded the terrifying moment when 30 feet high waves smashed into holiday resorts without warning from clear blue skies sweeping tens of thousands of people of many nationalities into a sudden eternity. The scenes have been relayed in news broadcasts and television reports across the world moving the hearts of millions in the richer nations to give generously to disaster funds. Rescue and relief agencies mounted an international operation on an unprecedented scale that ignored the differences of race, religion and nationality in a common desire to help the suffering. This response reveals something of the good in humanity that is a clear reflection of the nature of God in whose identity all human beings are made.

But why did such an event occur? The geological explanation of the shifting of the tectonic plates that cross the Indian Ocean is clear. But is there any other significance? Many of the eyewitness accounts from survivors have spoken of their experience in apocalyptic terms. Journalists have described the event and the consequent scenes of devastation as of 'biblical proportions'.

How should Christians react? Of course we should be giving whatever practical assistance that we can and we should be including both victims and the survivors in our prayers. Our compassion should include the thousands of children who have been orphaned, the million people who have been made homeless, the fishing communities that have lost their means of livelihood and the untold number of grieving relatives who will never know what happened to their loved ones. But Christians also have another duty; to interpret what the Bible says concerning events that have a spiritual significance. Is this just such an event? Does God have anything to say to the world through the fearful scenes that have captured the attention of the entire world? These are questions in the minds of millions of people across the globe.

Even among those who have only the vaguest belief in a God of the universe, the colossal display of nature's power is an awesome experience that causes even the most hardened humanist to ask questions about the nature and purpose of life. For the Christian, struggling to understand the

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mysteries of suffering in the context of the universal love of God revealed in Jesus, the question that comes sharply into focus is, has God allowed this to happen for a specific purpose and if so, what is he saying to the world? Is there anything in the Bible that might help us to understand the present situation?

There are a great many biblical prophecies that have already been fulfilled. But there are some *unfulfilled* prophecies of great significance, including words spoken by Jesus. Some of these appear to relate to events in our own lifetime such as the rebirth of the land of Israel in 1948 and Jerusalem coming back into the hands of the Jews in 1967 after nearly 2,000 years. These were events foreseen by Jesus and referred to in his teaching of his disciples in the final days of his life upon earth and recorded in Matthew 24 and Luke 21.

In Isaiah 24 there is a prophecy as yet unfulfilled about a time coming when there will be a great shaking of the earth. 'The earth is broken up, the earth is split asunder, the earth is thoroughly shaken' (v.19). More than five-hundred years before Christ, the prophet was given a revelation that a time of widespread destruction would come upon the earth that would engulf people of all classes, 'priests and people, masters and servants, buyers and sellers, borrowers and lenders, debtors and creditors' (v.2). He saw the crust of the earth being shaken resulting in whole cities lying in ruins. He wrote, 'The ruined city lies desolate; the entrance to every house is barred. In the streets they cry out for drink; all joy turns to gloom, all gaiety is banished from the earth. The city is left in ruins, its gates battered to pieces. The floodgates of the heavens are opened and the foundations of the earth shake' (vv. 10-12).

Another prophecy from roughly the same period comes from the prophet Haggai, given in the year 520 BC. It says, 'This is what the Lord Almighty says, "In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations" ' (2.6-7). That prophecy was still referring to a future time at the end of the first century AD because it is repeated in Hebrews (12.26) which is one of the last books to have been written in the apostolic era.

Jesus himself refers to a time of international turmoil at some time in the future which will be a prelude to his own second coming. He gave a list of things that will be characteristic of that time, recorded in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. The list includes international conflict and persecution of Christians, but significantly it also includes numerous natural phenomena that strike fear into the lives of men and women caught up in their occurrences. These natural disasters include famines and earthquakes, 'the roaring and the tossing of the sea' (Luke 21.25) and a tremendous shaking of the earth that will cause great fear and will bring 'great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now' (Matthew 24.21).

But what about the 125,000 people who are known to have lost their lives and the thousands who are still missing and will never be identified? Was the tsunami an act of judgment upon the wicked? Western tourists, local fishermen, women and children, rich and poor; all alike were caught up in the destruction hurled upon the land from the sea. There was no distinction between the good and the wicked, between those living good and upright lives and those who were doing evil things. And this accords perfectly with teaching of Jesus on the disasters that occurred during his own lifetime. Jesus was questioned about some of the people in Galilee who had been murdered by Pilate and the 18 people who had died when a tower block collapsed in the Siloam district of Jerusalem. He asked 'Do you think that they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish' Luke 13.1-5).

This is exactly what Jesus would be saying if he were alive today. But every committed Christian knows that Jesus actually is alive today! Moreover, he has left us the Holy Spirit to enable us to be in communication with the Father and to give us the spiritual insight to understand the meaning of the revelation of God's purposes given to us in Scripture.

So what is God saying to us through the tsunami? It is a clear word of warning to rich and poor, to young and old, men and women of all nationalities, and races and creeds. Throughout the Bible there are warnings that God is not simply the one who created the universe and then disappeared

from the scene, but that he holds us human beings responsible for our actions. He has laid down guidelines for acceptable human behaviour and has declared in unmistakable terms the things that are deeply offensive to him such as the shedding of innocent blood, the misuse of our sexual urges, the exploitation of the poor and the denial of justice to the powerless; plus the spiritual sins of engaging in witchcraft, necromancy, child sacrifice and turning to false religion once we have discovered the truth.

When human beings indulge in practices that God has specifically forbidden there are severe consequences. The reason why great destruction comes upon the earth in the revelation given in Isaiah 24 is that, 'The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt' (vv.5-6).

The Bible declares that all people are sinners and that the only salvation is through Messiah Jesus. His own testimony was, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14.6). The fact that thousands of people have gone to eternity without knowing the way to the Father should be a salutary lesson to us. It should stir us to greater efforts to communicate the truth to those around, especially if we have unbelievers in our own family or among our friends and neighbours. It should stir us to give greater support for those whose lives are dedicated to communicating the gospel by word and by practical service both at home and overseas. It should also stir us to spend more time in studying the Bible so that we can understand God's purposes and the events that are happening in our own lifetime.

The tsunami is a strong warning sign that we have already entered the period that Jesus described as the time leading up to his own second coming. We may expect many more natural disasters to happen in the next few years with an increase in the number of earthquakes, storms, floods, plagues and diseases. These have been escalating sharply in the past 30 years but they have been largely ignored or scornfully dismissed by both religious and secular leaders in our post-modern secular humanist culture. We have chosen to ignore the increased number of severe earthquakes since the 1970s; the severe storms, floods and landslides that have hit many parts of the world; the plagues of locusts that have devastated vast areas of Africa; the new diseases such as AIDS that have already killed millions and threaten millions more. In his love and mercy God sends warnings to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

The tsunami is a strong warning sign that should lead us all to reconsider our lives and to take seriously the biblical teaching on the signs of the times leading up to the Day of the Lord, the Parousia, the Second-Coming of Jesus. Read carefully one of the final words in the New Testament concerning that Day and the coming of the Kingdom of God. 'At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens". The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken - that is, created things - so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a Kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12.26-29).

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