

Lessons from a Tsunami

We have just witnessed a calamity of massive proportions. Over 200 000 deaths have now been confirmed in what is now confirmed as the worst Tsunami disaster ever recorded, outside of the Flood of Noah's day. The power of the earthquake was so massive as to affect the rotation of the world. The kind of damage, destruction and death it brought ought to cause every Christian to think long and hard.

What does a calamity like this teach us about God? What can we learn about Him, and about the way we should relate to Him? To act as if this doesn't really affect us is to live in a bubble. All around us, people are asking: "Where is God in this? What does this mean about God?" And we need to respond to events as big as this with biblical answers.

There is one school of thought that would tell us that there is nothing we can learn from this tragedy about God, because He was not involved, it was Satan. Therefore, all we can learn is that Satan is bad and God is good. But the Bible does not teach us this. The classic place to learn this is the book of Job. Though it was Satan who devised the tragedies that came into Job's life, it was God who allowed them. After the loss of ten children, Job says in 1:21:

"And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

He does not say, the LORD gave, and Satan took away. God is the ultimate power here, according to the Bible. Take note, what killed Job's sons is what we would call a natural disaster: "While he *was* yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

(Job 1:18-19) It was natural in the eyes of man – but God controlled it. Satan needed permission to bring this upon Job.

"And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD."

(Job 1:12)

"And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life."

(Job 2:6)

If Job had believed this modern idea that somehow Satan is sovereign over tragedy, and God is not involved, he would not have asked this question: ". What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"

(Job 2:10)

So there is no doubt that Satan is real. There is no doubt he is behind much human misery and suffering. But Satan can go no further than what God permits. God uses Satan's rage and rebellion to end up glorifying Himself. He used Satan's hatred of Job to purify and mature Job. So while God does not delight in misery, tragedy and suffering – God is able to use such things for spiritual ends. This brings us to the first main point we learn about God from a tragedy like this:

I. God is Sovereign

Sovereign means God is the final ruling power. He has all power, and all authority to exercise that power. In other words, He has infinite might, and an infinite right to exercise that might. God must report to no higher authority. He is not accountable to anyone, for no one is His peer, and no one could be purer and more just. He is absolutely sovereign. This means that He is running the universe, and our world, exactly as He wants to. Being all powerful, He is not struggling or frustrated.

“But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased. (Psa 115:3)”

How could God have done all He pleased if He was actually frustrated and miserable and defeated?

Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure: (Isa 46:9-10)

The Biblical truth is that:

“The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.” (Psa 103:19)

He is the reason such a thing happened. Not Satan; not chance; not coincidence. Though Satan was the one doing the damage to Job, the Bible says:

“Then came there unto him all his brethren, and all his sisters, and all they that had been of his acquaintance before, and did eat bread with him in his house: and they bemoaned him, and comforted him over all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him” (Job 42:11)

The inspired Word of God says that it was God, who was the ultimate cause. The same is true of this tragedy.

Now, if we are thinking people, this will immediately raise some objections in our mind. How can a good God, even if He did not directly command the earthquake, how could He allow it? There is no biblical dispute that He allowed it, and therefore, in the final analysis, He was the ultimate cause. But how do we reconcile a sovereign God, ruling the world, who claims to be good, but allows such terrible things?

The answer is not an easy one. But part of the answer is this: God is able to see things that we are not able to see. God sees the tragedy and the suffering. But He also sees spiritual consequences which we cannot see from our vantage point. Picture two ants walking across a mosaic - from their point of view, when they walk over a dark tile, they cannot understand why it is dark. They cannot fathom why there should be these dark patches in an otherwise white landscape. However, if they were humans, they would see that those dark tiles make up a magnificent picture when blended in with

the white tiles. There is a pattern and a purpose in the pain, one that requires the perspective of eternity to understand ultimately.

God is able to see things in ways that we cannot. He was able to see both the tragedy of His Son dying on the cross, as well as the incredible act of redemption it was.

“I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things. (Isa 45:7)

That does not mean God is the author of sin – evil in that verse refers to tragedy, chaos. God can author it. He is permitted to do so.

“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand.” (Deu 32:39)

Someone objects: “But that means God is a murderer!” No, God cannot murder. When He takes a human life – He takes back what is His own. A human lives because of the breath of God. When God calls it back, it is no more evil than if a potter should take back one of his vessels.

God rules – He is sovereign. Ephesians 1:11, speaking about the predestination of believers, says:

“In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:” (Eph 1:11)

He works all things, including a tragedy like this, for purposes that are greater than we know right now. We get some hint of that final purpose in Ephesians 1:10:

“That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him:” (Eph 1:10)

God plans to bring all things together ultimately for a display of His glory. How these various part work together toward that aim, we do not know. We know they do somehow.

This mighty sovereignty, when used on this scale, shows us something else about God.

His Omnipotence.

God is all powerful. In fact in Job 38, we have God’s own testimony of how He controls the sea:

“Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb? When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddling band for it, And brake up for it my decreed place, and set bars and doors, And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed?”

(Job 38:8-11)

“Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them.”
(Psa 89:9)

However, in any tragedy like this, we see two more elements of God’s nature: **justice and mercy.**

His Justice

We see God as just on the one hand. Many of the nations affected are in the middle of paganism. Does that make them more worthy of death than other sinners? No, but you do see a theme in Scripture, that God’s justice is sometimes poured out on those who provoke Him with idolatry. The Canaanites that were driven out of the land were an example:

“Speak not thou in thine heart, after that the LORD thy God hath cast them out from before thee, saying, For my righteousness the LORD hath brought me in to possess this land: but for the wickedness of these nations the LORD doth drive them out from before thee.
(Deu 9:4)

God judged the pagan Canaanites, using the Israelites. It was not that the Israelites were so righteous; it was that God’s patience with the Canaanites had run out. In fact, He had said to Abraham 400-some years earlier in Genesis 15:16:

“But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. (Gen 15:16)

I was told that many of the nations involved in this tragedy had become a haven for perverted ways, condemned in 1 Corinthians 6:9. I believe the perversions of many of these nations was part of the judgement. There will come a day when God will perfectly vindicate His name and judge all sin. But now, there are echoes of it. There are glimpses, previews of what God will do in perfection one day.

His Mercy. Firstly, I believe it is mercy in that thousands of children were taken to heaven, and spared entering a religion that would have damned them. I believe children that do not reach the age of accountability are covered by God’s grace and when they die, are taken to heaven. Think of how many thousands would have reached that age of accountability, with no Gospel witness, and plunged into the darkness of Hinduism, Islam, Voodoo, Buddhism. Instead, God took them before Satan could lay His blinding lies upon their eyes - that’s mercy. **I believe God’s judgement sometimes falls on pagan nations as a gracious warning of what is to come.** That might sound strange – that a tragedy could be mercy to those who are living, but it is exactly that. It is a warning. Ecclesiastes 7:2 says:

“It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.” (Ecc 7:2)

Tragedy causes man to think eternity, to consider the truth, the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

It is an ominous warning of what is yet to come.:

“See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.” (Heb 12:25-27)

God is going to judge the world in such a way, that the only things left will be things of eternal value. He will shake the world till all temporal things are shown to be weak, and the things which cannot be shaken - eternal things - will remain and glorify Him. That will be a glorious and a terrible day. I believe you read about it in Revelation:

“And there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such as was not since men were upon the earth, so mighty an earthquake, and so great. And the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell: and great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath. And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And there fell upon men a great hail out of heaven, every stone about the weight of a talent: and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great.” (Rev 16:18-21)

God sends the labour pains of the last times, as a merciful warning that the birth is about to happen.

So in a tragedy like this, we see God is Sovereign, we see He is powerful, we see He is just, we see He is Merciful. But what does that mean for man? How should man react in front of a sovereign, powerful God, who is just, as well as merciful? Firstly, men should...

Exercise repentant faith

Consider that if you take just these three things about God – He is **Sovereign**, He is **Just**, He is **Merciful** – what impact it will have on your thinking. If there is a God who runs the world, then I will no doubt have to meet Him and give an account. I live in His world. But if I find out that He is just – he demands righteousness, He demands that the inhabitants of His world honour Him in a particular way – that will fill me with dread. The God of this Tsunami expects me to be right with Him. But take it one step further – if I find out He is merciful and provides pardon for those who want it, I will go to Him for mercy.

“There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. (Luk 13:1-5)

Jesus' point was that the lesson of tragedies is not that some people are more wicked and deserving of judgement than others, it is that all men are worthy of death and tragedies are warnings.

Have reverent fear

In Scripture, when we read Hebrews 10, it ends with a connector – 'wherefore'. It says, in light of the incredible power of God, do the following:

"Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire: (Heb 10:28-29)

Have reverent fear that serves God. What is reverent fear? It is knowing two things: the greatness of God which could destroy you, and the goodness of God which instead saves you. There is an awesome sense of vulnerability before the raw power of the Almighty, that then links with a trembling joy – He is for me, not against me. He has accepted me in the beloved.

If you focus only on the greatness of God you are likely to become fearful in a negative way, regarding God as being against you. You can quickly become like a Baal worshipper – doing things to appease this distant, impersonal, great God. On the other hand, if you focus on nothing more than the goodness of God – you are liable to end up being too familiar with God. You lose the wonder and awe of knowing the glory of the One who is now your Father and Friend. If I had as a personal friend one of the most powerful men on earth, I would not try to hide from my mind the fact of His great power. I would consider both his greatness and his goodness. The more I think on his greatness, the larger his goodness seems in being my friend. We need to use events like this to remind us what a powerful, awesome God is our Friend. Not some all-powerful force with no mind of its own but the all-knowing Person, the Great I AM – He who rules the waves, chooses to save us in Christ.

In natural law there are two forces – the centrifugal and the centripetal. The centrifugal force pulls away from the centre of rotation, while the centripetal pulls toward it. If you take a stone, tie a string to it, and then whirl it over your head – both forces are in action to keep that motion going. The stone exerts a centrifugal force on the string – it pulls away, and the string exerts a centripetal force on the stone, it pulls it toward itself. In the same way we can see the greatness of God like a centrifugal force. God's immeasurable greatness holds us reverently distant, like when Israel saw God on Mt Sinai. But when we see the love of God it is like the centripetal force which draws us. Both, in their right proportion cause a healthy relationship with God.

Finally, believers ought to have
Renewed fervour for evangelism and mercy.

When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be

witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (Act 1:6-8)

The disciples wanted to know what was happening and when. Jesus' reply was that they were to concern themselves with evangelism, not philosophy. When we see events like this, we are not to spend hours trying to figure out an end-times timetable. We are to press forward with preaching the Gospel.

It is a tragedy, but most of the deaths in the Tsunami have taken place in what we call the 10/40 window – the most unevangelised strip of the world.

And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. (Rom 13:11-12)

It is also interesting to note that when Jesus instructed His disciples to pray regarding evangelism, He focused praying for workers.

“Then saith He unto His disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.” (Mat 9:37-38)

That's the call – there is no shortage of people who want to be saved. There's a shortage of reapers – of people who'll go and collect them, so to speak.

Repentant faith, reverent fear and renewed fervour for evangelism. These are the right responses to a God who has again shown Himself to be Sovereign, Omnipotent, Just and Merciful.