

Suffering Tsunamis

The Answer to Anguish

January 9, 2005

WOULDN'T OR COULDN'T

We're taking a break from Romans today, to talk about something that's currently in the public forum. That's God's involvement (or lack of it) in the recent Asian Tsunami.

On "Hannity & Colmes" an evangelist said it was the devil that caused Southern Asia's recent tsunami.

On "Tony Snow" a pastor claimed that God had simply unleashed his wrath and vengeance. Alan Colmes summed up the atheists' perspective on these views:

- A. Either God couldn't stop the tsunami because he's not as powerful as the devil (or even the force of nature).
- B. Or, God wouldn't stop the tsunami because he's not good or loving enough to be troubled by our "petty" problems.

And since it "has" to be one of those two answers, and either invalidates a Christian God ... Alan concluded, there is no God. So, does the presence of suffering mean the absence of God? It seems as believers we're given three choices:

- A. God isn't there - which, in light of all the physical evidence, I think requires *more* faith to believe. And you can't really be a believer and believe this one!
- B. God isn't all-good - he either doesn't care about us, or enjoys tormenting us. But then, he did so love the world that he sent His only Son to suffer on mankind's behalf; so that pretty much rules out apathy and sadism!
- C. God isn't all-powerful - that's like believing a man could create and build a house, but not change the light bulbs.

As Christians we believe that: God exists. God is all-good. God is all-powerful. Natural disasters happen. So, how can all four of those statements be true?

There's a fourth option that Alan didn't mention:

- D. God is all-good and all-powerful *and* all-purposeful.

ALL GOOD

Q: What does it mean to be a “Good God”?

- I’m more or less a “good dad” ... more or less!
- It’s against my will to see my children in pain.

Yet, I allow the dentist to repair their teeth, and the doctor to inoculate them; because if I didn’t allow certain affliction, they’d inevitably suffer worse affliction.

So, in order to achieve my ultimate will, I must at times allow that which (in a limited fashion) goes against that same will. I learned this lesson when my son screamed for my help while a doctor was giving him anesthesia.

- Sometimes to protect, we must refuse to shield

A *loving* God would have to allow any suffering that’s medicinal, remedial, or necessary for mankind’s benefit and wellbeing.

Q: Isn’t it a bit intellectually arrogant for a finite being (Alan) to conclude that an infinitely wise being wouldn’t or couldn’t tolerate short-range pain for long-range welfare?

He’s demonstrated how the *worst* tragedy in the world’s history (man killing his own Savior) resulted in the *best* thing that’s ever happened in the world’s history.

And I assume that God has a very different perspective on death than we do. To us death is an exit, but to God it’s an entrance.

The death of one that belongs to the Lord is precious in his sight. – Psalm 116:15
NCV

However, from God’s perspective nothing could be more horrific than a death *without* surrender to a savior. And suffering leads a lot of people to surrender.

- Suffering is bad, but a soul lost is infinitely worse

According to the CIA’s “World Factbook” there are 6,379,157,361 people on earth who’ll live an average life span of 64.05 years.

- That’s 272,867 deaths/day; a tsunami amount every 14 hours!

In light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on earth, will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel. –
Mother Teresa

ALL POWERFUL

Q: What does it mean to be “Omnipotent (all-powerful)?

Q: Does omnipotence mean that God can do *anything*?

A: No. It means he can do anything that’s possible.

For instance, *because* he’s omnipotent it’s not possible for God to make mistakes (that requires being weak or dim-witted) which he isn’t. So, God *can’t* make mistakes.

Q: Can the Lord make a rock so big that he can’t pick it up?

A: No. It’s a *mistake* to try to create a self-contradiction.

Only a dim-wit would ask for round squares or colorless color. It’d be like trying to create a world where people have freewill and yet no potential to sin or cause harm. Freewill includes the possibility of moral evil within its own definition.

Perhaps a universe without suffering would be a lot like:

- A fitness center without weights and loads.
- A training-camp without an obstacle course.

Those tires do nothin’ but slow down the recruits. And what’s with that mud pond, the rope swing, and the climbing wall?! We’re pavin’ this whole thing, and hauling ‘em through on a Greyhound!

- Our universe was created as a sole-making machine

It produces free-willed mortal beings who can choose to develop Christ-like character, and mature in their appreciation of God. Can you have that *without* struggles and burdens and hurdles?

Even though Jesus was the Son of God, he learned obedience by what he suffered. – Hebrews 5:8 NCV

Even people without faith understand that growth comes through hardship; that endurance and resolve offer insight, empathy, and credibility that we wouldn’t and couldn’t have without it.

We shouldn’t be too quick to blame the devil or the sins of those who suffer. The disciples asked Jesus:

... “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”
“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” – John 9:1-4 NIV

THE FINAL ANSWER

We could have a great argument – I mean theological debate – about *why* volcanoes and earthquakes and floods happen.

Q: Was earth created this way, and Eden was a utopian oasis?

Q: Was earth caused this way, a chain reaction to Adam's sin?

Q: Was earth cursed this way, to counter sin's contamination?

I can't trace out the exact origins of earth's distressing and devastating ways, but I know by being broken, it teaches me:

- A. To appreciate existence, and beauty, and loved ones.
- B. Death can come at any time and I better be prepared.
- C. My desire for perfect joy will not be met down here.
- D. I need to look beyond this world for my fulfillment.
- E. I am fragile, and mortal, and as temporary as smoke.
- F. I am as dependant on God as on air, food, and water.

And just by running its destructive course, it continually shakes mankind out of his complacency and procrastination.

But, in the end God has only offered partial explanations. So, the answer to anguish and suffering won't come in the form of a tightly woven scientific or theological equation.

- Sufferers don't care about philosophies or formulas.
- Sufferers yearn for a reliable rescuer and redeemer.

That's why the answer is the *Answerer*: a loving father who never forsakes - a faithful friend who has ultimate control.

The disciples were terrified when they went through a minor "tsunami" while crossing a body of water with Jesus.

Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. – Matthew 8:24-26 NIV

Q: Why did Jesus say, "You of little faith" when it was him they turned to?

A: Because there're two things Jesus wants us to know and trust:

1. He'll get us through it, not just keep us from it.
2. He's in control even when he seems to be sleeping.