

DeeperStudy Newsletter

Issue 9

The Bible Study e-Zine



The Bible in the News

Tsunami! Where was God?

The powerful tsunami that on Dec. 26, 2004, hit the lands in and surrounding the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the South China Sea [see this [UNESCO animation](#)] caused terrible devastation and immediate loss of thousands of lives, followed by an aftermath in which tens of thousands more perished. [[View videos](#)] The earthquake-triggered tsunami has prompted people all over the world to ask themselves and others, "Where was God when this happened? Did He fall asleep? Is He even real?"

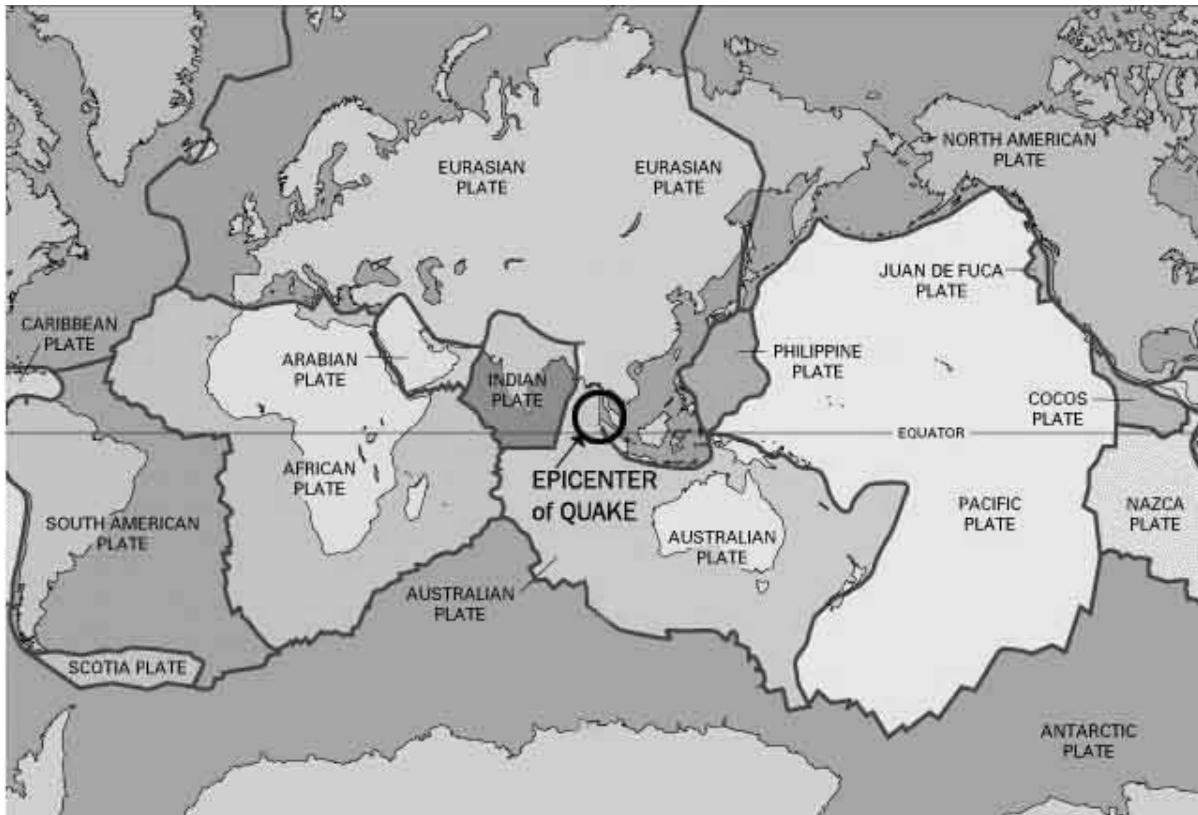
Sometimes, what we call disasters is just a part of God's organization of nature; humans are merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. In Ecclesiastes 9:11-12, wise King Solomon observes:

I have seen something else under the sun:
The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all.

Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come:
As fish are caught in a cruel net,
or birds are taken in a snare,
so men are trapped by evil times
that fall unexpectedly upon them.

It appears that the 12/04 tsunami falls into this category. People were killed with no discrimination with regard to race, creed, class, or religion. If God had a purpose in the tsunami, it remains obscure to me.

You will hear some Christians deny that events happen by chance because they think that this means God has released His grip on the controls of the universe. But according to this passage, some disasters just happen. This is not because God has no control but



because He has constructed the universe in such a way that an unbroken chain of causes and effects will take place according to the physical laws He has established unless He intervenes. In the case of the tsunami, its cause was an extremely powerful undersea earthquake. The earthquake in turn was caused by the shifting of tectonic plates. The plates are all the building blocks of the earth's crust, designed to interact in this way. Earthquakes happen all over the world. Those that happen in or near the earth's oceans sometimes cause tsunamis.

Yet, as difficult as it is for us to accept emotionally, the Bible affirms that God sometimes causes natural disasters. In Isaiah 45:5 and 7, the LORD confronts Cyrus:

I am the LORD, and there is no other;
 apart from me there is no God....
 I form the light and create darkness,
 I bring prosperity and create disaster;
 I, the LORD, do all these things.

Cyrus was probably a Zoroastrian, believing in two gods— one called Ahura Mazda, who is perfectly good and brings blessings to the world,



and his twin brother, Angra or Ahriman, infinitely evil and bringing the world trouble.



But the LORD God claims to be the sole deity of the universe. Some disasters happen due to God's permissive will, as is the case with the calamities that befell Job (Job 1:18–19). Others come in response to God's positive command for the purpose of punishing the wicked and motivating people to repent.

In Amos 4:6–13, for example, the LORD explains His purpose in releasing one disaster after another upon Israel:

I gave you empty stomachs in every city
and lack of bread in every town,
yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

"I also withheld rain from you
when the harvest was still three months away.
I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from
another.
One field had rain; another had none and dried up.
People staggered from town to town for water
but did not get enough to drink,
yet you have not returned to me," declares the
LORD.



"Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards,
I struck them with blight and mildew.
Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees,
yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

"I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt.
I killed your young men with the sword,
along with your captured horses.
I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps,
yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

"I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.
You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire,
yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

"Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel,
and because I will do this to you,
prepare to meet your God, O Israel."

He who forms the mountains, creates the wind,
and reveals his thoughts to man,
he who turns dawn to darkness,
and treads the high places of the earth—
the LORD God Almighty is his name.



A similar thing happens in Revelation, chapters 8 and 9. The natural disasters pictured by the trumpets seem to stand for a wide range of ways that God can use to prompt the wicked to repent. In this case, however, they stubbornly refuse: "The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the

work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts" (Rev. 9:20-21).

Sometimes, however, God's purpose is only to punish the wicked, as in the Great Flood (Gen. 6:13, 17) and the great hail God rained down on the Amorites (Josh. 10:11). In the bowls of wrath revealed in Revelation chapter 16, God makes no allowance for repentance. Many scholars are convinced that John's vision symbolizes this by stating that no one is allowed into heaven's temple until the bowls of wrath have all been poured out, making it impossible to intercede and make atonement for the sinners (Rev. 15:8; compare Num. 16:46-50; 2 Sam. 24:15-25; Jer. 7:9-20).

When such punishing disasters take place, the righteous are sometimes spared, as in the case of several of the plagues against Egypt (Exod. 8:22-23; 9:3-7, 23-26; 10:22-23; 11:4-7; 12:12-13, 28-30). On other occasions, however, the righteous suffer right along with the wicked. Consider, for example, the Habakkuk's dialogue with God about the wicked among his people. In answer to Habakkuk's complaint, the LORD promises to send the Babylonians against his people (1:5-11). In response, the prophet asks (Hab. 1:13):

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you cannot tolerate wrong.
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?
Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up
those more righteous than themselves?

In vv. 14-16, Habakkuk says the wicked Babylonians catch and kill people like fishermen. It is like they gather nations in their dragnet; no one escapes. Then they celebrate and worship their "net" as a god. Then Habakkuk asks (v. 17), "Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy?"

The answer comes back that God understands how wicked they are (2:1-19). He concludes with the reassuring affirmation: "The LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him" (2:20). In other words, God is saying, "Habakkuk, you're just going to have to trust Me on this one. Even though disasters happen that you don't understand, I'm still on the throne. I still rule the universe."

Habakkuk's response is commendable. After describing his fearful witnessing of the LORD's wrath, he recommits himself to trusting Him:

I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,



yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.

That's the kind of response we must have when we witness catastrophes like the tsunami of December 26, 2004. We can acknowledge that we don't understand why God would allow such a thing to happen, but at the same time recognize that we are so limited in our perspective compared to the Eternal One. He has proven Himself faithful over a thousand generations, and we can trust that He "does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17).

The righteous can be sure of this: God has not forgotten them and has promised to guide all events—even horrendous natural disasters—for their ultimate good (Rom. 8:28–29). His purpose for us is to use the things that happen to us to transform us into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. If He accomplishes that, with our willing cooperation, anything else that happens to us is worth it. Paul reasons, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18), and he writes this:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. — 2 Cor. 4:16–18

Nor is Paul only referring to persecutions; natural calamities fall within his scope, as his laundry list of sufferings in Second Corinthians 11:23–29 demonstrates.

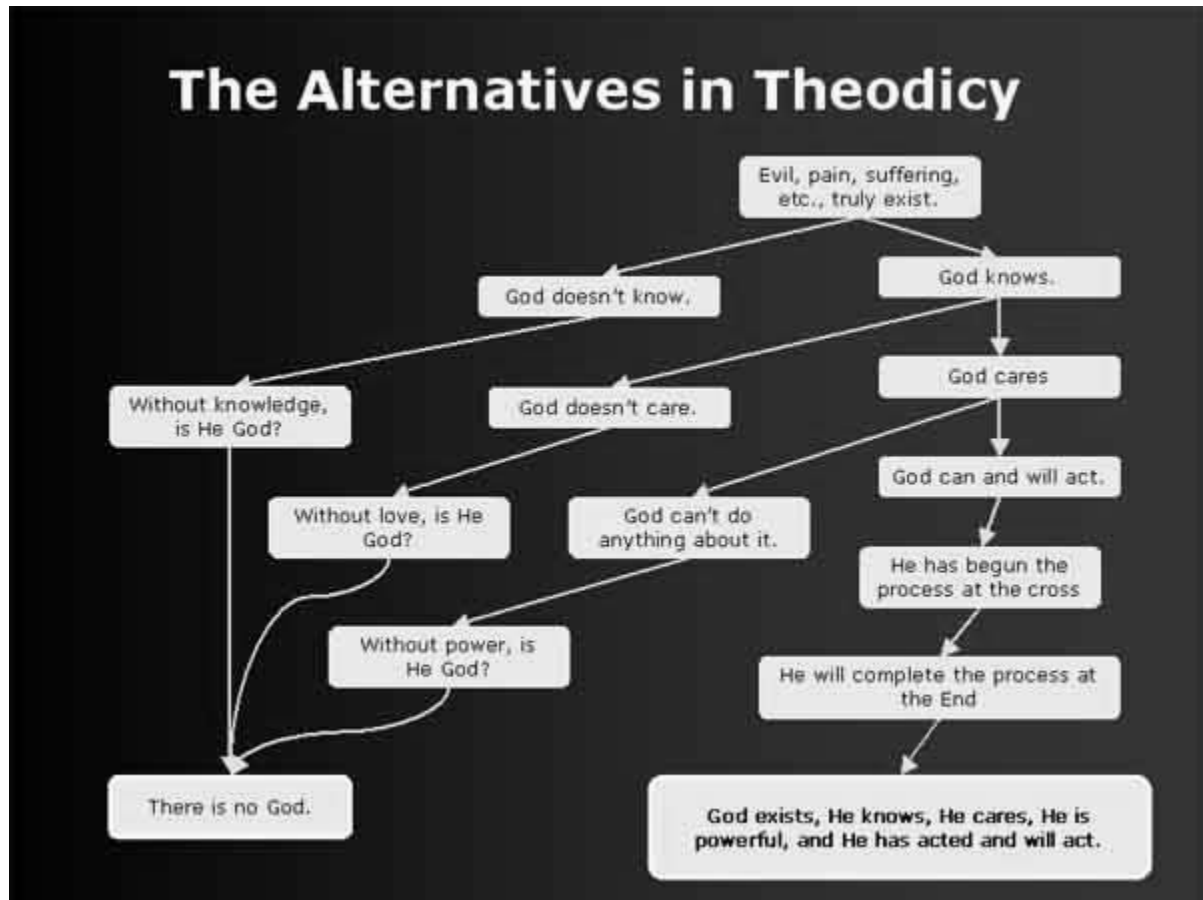
The wicked have no such hope. If disaster overtakes them, they can only despair (Ps. 73:18–20; Isa. 57:20–21). If they survive, their grief over their losses can prove inconsolable (1 Thess. 4:13). Disasters that should draw them toward God may only harden their hearts as they resist the pull (see Exod. 8:15, 32; Rev. 9:20–21).

When we witness a disaster that falls on others, we should approach God in prayer on their behalf and do what we can to lend aid. When we experience one ourselves, we should run to Him for rescue, for aid, and for consolation. God can use a terrible disaster to bring about a wondrous good in someone's life. The cross is proof enough of that.

Want to go deeper?

Theologians and other intellectuals have wrestled with this issue for centuries. The basic problem is Christianity (for one) teaches that: 1) God is infinitely powerful; 2) God knows everything; 3) God is infinitely good and loving toward human beings; and 3) evil exists. The challenge is in explaining how all four can be simultaneously true. Everyone agrees that 3) is true. Does God know about evil and care about the harm it causes human being, but is not powerful enough to destroy evil? Or does He have the knowledge of evil and the power to overcome it but doesn't care? Or does He care about what happens to us and has the power to stop evil, but is not aware of the problem? Efforts to explain this problem fall under the term "Theodicy" (which means "Justifying God").

The atheist believes that this is one of the strongest arguments against the existence of God. The existence of evil is proof that God, at least as defined according to the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures, cannot exist, atheists claim.



Christians have made two responses--soul-building and free will--and the fundamental principles of these two responses were laid down by the early Christian church leaders Irenaeus and Augustine, respectively.

In his work, *Against Heresies* (4.37–41), Irenaeus taught that God permits the existence of evil as a necessary component for the making of souls. To teach human beings to choose good instead of evil, evil had to exist. But when they pursue the evil instead of God who calls them, their sin is not God's fault but theirs. (In modern times, philosopher/theologian John Hick in his *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), has expanded this argument, reaching the unbiblical conclusion that ultimately all human beings will be drawn into God's kingdom.)

In his *Treatise on Grace and Free Will* (chapter 3), Augustine explains how God had to permit evil in order to endow his human creatures with the gift of free will. For Him to give us free will is a greater good than forcing us all to be His robots.

A third response we can call "End-time resolution." Our current situation, in which evil still exists and mishaps fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous, is only an instant in the human history that stretches into eternity. We therefore cannot conclude that the present situation is the permanent one; in the cross of Christ and the empty tomb, God has defeated the powers of darkness--including evil, catastrophes, and suffering. They

are all only temporary, and at the end of time, at the dawn of "the new heavens and new earth" (2 Peter 3:13; 1 Cor. 15:24–28, 50–57), God will sweep all three away forever.

Nature was "subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:20–21). Once God completes his mysterious and sometime inscrutable purposes with evil, pain, disasters, and suffering, they will be no more.

Other resources:

Lactantius, *Treatise on the Anger of God*, [Chapter 13](#).

1940 Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain*. London & New York: Macmillan. Reprinted many times since 1940.

1972 Warren, Thomas B. *Have Atheists Proved There is no God?* Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate. This is a revision of the last chapter of Warren's doctoral dissertation at Vanderbilt.

1980 Gerstenberger, Erhard S., and Schrage, Wolfgang. *Suffering*. Transl. John E. Steely. Nashville, TN: Abingdon. Explores suffering throughout the Old and New Testaments.

1982 Boyce, M. "Ahura Mazda," 684–687 in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Ed. Ehsan Yarshater. [Read online](#) (Adobe Acrobat document)

1984 Feinberg, John S. "Theodicy," 1083-1086 in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Ed. Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker.

1993 McGrath, Alister E. *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths: Building Bridges to Faith Through Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 100-108.

1995 Rush, Terry. *God Will Make a Way*. West Monroe, LA: Howard. See especially part 3: "Pain's Joy."

1997 Jones, Jerry. *Beyond the Storm: Finding God's Calm Assurance*. West Monroe, LA: Howard. See especially chapter 8: "Why must we suffer?"

2002 Murphy, Gannon. ["God and the Problem of Evil."](#) Minnesota Apologetics Project.

This issue's free offer: Racism e-booklet

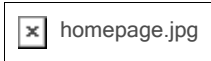
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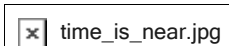
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