

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia (Reuters) - Asia's tsunami death toll soared above 125,000 on Friday as millions struggled to find food, shelter and clean water, while the world began what may prove to be the biggest relief effort in history.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said the disaster that has displaced 5 million people was "an unprecedented global catastrophe and it requires an unprecedented global response." He said a half-billion dollars had been pledged so far.

Aid agencies and experts warned a second wave of death from contagious diseases could hit Indian Ocean areas devastated by Sunday's tsunami, with children especially vulnerable.

"The worst is yet to come, I am afraid, because of the breakdown of sanitation facilities," said Dr. Robert Edelman, a professor of medicine at the University of Maryland.

Some have described this horrendous natural disaster as an 'Act of God', but is it? Is He to blame for the destruction? And whether He is or not, how could He allow this to happen? Isn't He a loving God? These are the questions we are going to answer today.

Before we start, though, it's important for us to realize something. Any answers/guidelines we come up with today is not going to remove the grief of someone who is suffering through the situation. It's simply an explanation of how we should be seeing God's relation to the devastation that occurred. But as we all know, usually during times of grief, the BEST explanation is not good enough to ease our sorrow. Grief is to be experienced, will be experienced, but not necessarily answered.

One of the reasons we are so upset about things like this – natural events that cause death or pain – is because we have a mind-set that we should be rewarded and punished based on what we have done in our lives. Today, we're thinking, those people didn't do anything to deserve this. Why have they been punished for something that they didn't do? This kind of thinking is natural for humans. We have been doing this since the beginning of time. It is the reason almost all religions (except Christianity) believe in eternal life based on good works. They believe that if we do good things, then we will get good things. Imagine if this were true:

- Who would have been good enough to win the \$30 million dollar lottery – unless we expect that all our sins should have no consequences and all our “good deeds” should be rewarded many-fold. (Another incorrect expectation)
- The football team with the most “good” people would win every game – we would no longer want to trade for the most skilled players but the most moral players.
- The flu would become intelligent because it would only affect bad people. Same for all other infectious diseases.
- Only evil people would need hospitals
- Only the good would live to a very old age while only the evil would die young – if we filled the ranks of our troops with “good” young people, we would have no casualties.
- There would be no such thing as someone who had been a terrible sinner and then turned from their ways later in life, they would have died already.
- Finally, bringing this back to the situation at hand, earthquakes would only hit evil cities - If one argues that hurricanes and earthquakes have to be 'deserved', then they are **inconsistent** if they do not extend that to ALL events--however mild.

However, life is not like that. This is not only an unrealistic point of view, but it is illogical. Since the Bible tells us that none of us are righteous, that we all have sinned and fallen short, our theory would conclude with all of us having died young. There would be no one left on the earth and humanity would cease to exist!

As opposed to what many believe today, our expectations are incorrect if we think that bad things should only happen to bad people and good things will only happen to good people. In fact, we see that not only natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes and tornadoes kill innocent, “good” people, but we also see senseless killings, wars, drive-by shootings, kidnappings, rapes done to people by *people*. We live in a world where natural disasters destroy “good” people and people destroy “good” people. Our expectations are incorrect. What we have done in our lives does not preclude us from death and pain. The writers of the Psalms ask over and over again, “Why is it that those who are evil seem to be rewarded while the good are seemingly punished”. It doesn’t fit with our expectations, so we blame God. But when we blame God for what happens in nature or for evils that other people, we do so because of an mistaken expectation we have.

Not every storm, tornado or earthquake is from God’s direct intervention. *Natural laws* determine weather patterns. (And that said, if we had a better understanding and knowledge of all the natural laws, we would be much better at predicting the weather!) Sometimes God allows Satan to control the weather as we are taught in Job 1:12, 19. In fact, there are times when God Himself *does* intervene in the weather either to bless or curse certain nations. In Amos 4:9, God punishes Israel for their faithlessness. (“I blasted you with blight and mildew [from too much rain]. When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locust devoured them; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord”). However, these are examples of what God can do, but not what He typically does.

God created a world ruled by natural laws at the Creation of the Universe. If I step off a building, gravity will pull me crashing to the ground. If someone steps in front of a train, the train will strike him or her. It’s these same natural laws, like gravity and motion, that also determine weather patterns and geological circumstances. These laws are not subject to whether we think it’s fair or not – they affect everyone in all places. They cannot be violated. We cannot selectively decide which laws, which effects, we like and which ones we don’t. If natural laws did not always work in the same way all the time, we would be in the unenviable position of trying to figure out how to get through life. Do I need to worry about gravity today? Will the rain drops burn my umbrella? Will I sink into the pavement? Since the light isn’t reflecting off anything today, can I drive to work in pure darkness?

So bottom line is, God can control natural laws, and He has done so, but the norm is to allow the natural laws to govern nature. Those who question the benevolence of a God who allows natural laws to govern often call for a better world than this one. But they cannot describe the details necessary for its creation and maintenance. In every

imaginative setting they come up with, the actual long-term result of their scenario is always worse than the reality.

So to summarize so far,

- We have a set of expectations that good things will happen to good people and bad things will happen to bad people. The conclusion of these expectations is illogical and unrealistic.
- We have a loving God, who for our own good, has created a set of natural laws and though He can intervene, He normally allows nature to take its course.

So is this particular earthquake an act of God? There's no evidence to suggest that. What we should take away from this is: Jesus prophesied that we would see these signs as we neared the end times, but He doesn't tell us that He is causing it. It would be more precise to say that this earthquake is a sign, but not an act, of God.

Before I continue, a quick sidebar: In my research, I have run across many writers who are using this event to tell people that we are living in the end times and that things will actually become *worse* not better and that if they think this is bad, they should see what's coming. They follow that up with the message to repent and accept Jesus before it's too late. Two things about this approach – 1-It's not my style to preach gloom and doom and to try to scare people into accepting Christ. 2-These people are not wrong.

I heard a speaker on the radio say this week that this was the worse disaster in the history of man. While I don't want to belittle this event (the opposite is true, I want people to recognize the gravity of the event), there have been other horrible disasters in history.

- In 1889, the famous “Johnstown Flood” occurred in Pennsylvania. The dam of the South Fork Reservoir, twelve miles east of the city, burst during heavy rains. Over 2,000 people were killed, and property damage was estimated to be over \$10 million
- In 1969, Hurricane Camille killed more than 250 people in seven states from Louisiana to Virginia, leaving behind over \$1.5 billion in damage.
- In 1983, Hurricane Alicia struck near Galveston, killing 21 and causing over \$2 billion in damage.
- September 21, 1989—Hurricane Hugo strikes the southeastern coast of the United States. Over 25 people are killed, and over \$10 billion worth of damage results.
- October 17, 1989—an earthquake registering 7.1 on the Richter scale strikes the San Francisco Bay area in California. At least 62 people are killed, and damage estimates are placed at well over \$1 billion.
- August 24, 1992—Hurricane Andrew hits three counties in southern Florida. More than a dozen people lose their lives, and damage estimates are set at over \$20 billion.
- September 11, 1992, Hurricane Iniki devastates the Hawaiian islands. At least four people die, and damage is set at over \$1 billion.
- June 1993, huge portions of numerous states along the Mississippi River and its tributaries experienced the worst flooding in their history. Entire cities were

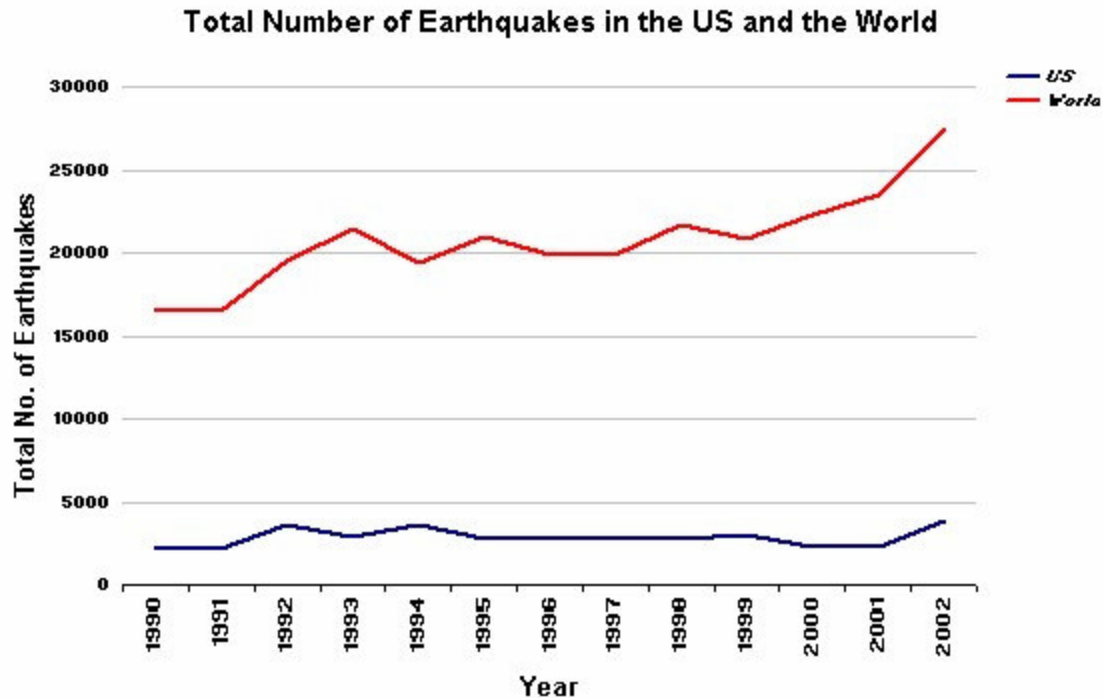
covered with water measured not in inches, but in feet. At least 47 people died, and more than 25,000 were evacuated from their homes.

As horrible as all of these are, the numbers don't seem to match up to the devastation that has occurred in Asia. Leaving the US and going back a bit, we find the following:

- In 526, an earthquake hit the country now known as Turkey and left 250,000 dead.
- A similar earthquake in China in 1556 killed over 830,000 people.
- Another quake in India in 1737 annihilated 300,000,
- Central China – Earthquake in 1920 kills 200,000
- Central China – Earthquake in 1927 kills 200,000
- Central China – Earthquake in 1932 kills 70,000
- A cyclone struck Bangladesh in 1991, killing 138,000 people.

Scientists say, "there is a 62% probability of at least one magnitude 6.7 or greater quake, capable of causing widespread damage, striking the San Francisco Bay region before 2032." – United States Geological Survey (USGS)

What we are seeing with all this information is that this is truly a devastating event – one of the worst in history, outside of a few other earthquakes and, of course, the Flood. What does this mean? Jesus told us in Luke "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven." Lk. 21:10-11 NIV. Here's more information regarding earthquakes:



Though we have progressed scientifically to understand better how to measure earthquakes and to recognize when one has occurred, our methods for this have not changed dramatically in these modern times and yet we see the largest increase in earthquakes have been seen since 1999. Hence this increase in the number of earthquakes has not been due to better monitoring tools but because there really has been a real increase in the number of earthquakes.

God has attached significance to these events. He knew they would happen, and He prophesied it so that we can know that His word is sure. For example, let's say we're standing on a railroad platform and you don't believe that I know anything about train schedules. I might say, "You will know rush hour is near when more trains begin to come to the platform." For sure, I am not causing more trains to come to the platform, but they come because it is closer to rush hour. The increased number of trains are a sign that rush hour is near. Earthquakes are typically signs, not necessarily acts, of God. So how are we to interpret these signs?

The most important question is not, "Why did this happen?" but instead, "How can I understand what has happened, and how am I going to react to it?"

The answer to these questions are based in scripture.

- 1 Peter 5:6-7 "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" We need to realize that we are completely *dependant* on God.
- Psalm 43:1-3 "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. Selah. " We can *call out to God* during these times and have confidence that He is in control.
- John 15:13 "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Do we realize that God calls us to *love each other*, especially in times of difficulty?
- Hebrews 9:27 "Inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once, and after this, judgment." Life on this earth is short, but there is more to life than just our time on earth. There is *eternity* to think about.
- Colossians 3:2 "Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things." So what are our priorities?
- Genesis 3:17b "Cursed is the ground because of you" When we fell from grace into sin, all of creation also fell. In Genesis 1: 31 "God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good." But sin destroyed the perfect world that God created for us. When we see disasters such as this, we need to *remember* that these things exist because of *sin*. We continue to experience the curse of that sin.
- 2 Chronicles 16:9 "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him." *Be committed* to Him. God restores us and strengthens us. He takes all things and works them together for good to those who love Him. (Romans 8:28)

In the end, we need to remember that this world was never intended to be a final home (Hebrews 11:13-16). Our time here is temporary (James 4:14). With God's help we are able to overcome whatever comes our way (Romans 8:35-39; Psalm 46:1-3).

So in conclusion, how are we to react to the devastation that has occurred in Asia?

- Let's change our set of expectations that only good things will happen to good people and bad things will happen to bad people. The conclusion of these expectations is illogical and unrealistic.
- Let's recognize that we have a loving God, who for our own good, has created a set of natural laws and that though He can intervene, He normally allows nature to take its course.
- Let's also recognize that this earthquake is part of the natural events occurring on this earth that Jesus told us would occur. It is part of the signs that the end times are approaching.
- Let us come to God – recognizing our dependence on Him for our daily needs, calling on Him in times of trouble, setting our minds on eternal, heavenly things and recognizing our sins.
- Finally, let's give what we can, to help those in need during this time.

Let us not be weary in doing good, for we will reap in due season, if we don't give up.
Galatians 6:9