

# A question to ponder: Does God cause natural disasters?

guest  
columnist

By Tony W. Cartledge

The tragic earthquake and tsunami that killed more than 150,000 people and injured or displaced millions in countries bordering the Indian Ocean has many people thinking about its cause.

On the day after Christmas, massive tectonic plates moving in opposite directions near the coast of Sumatra ground against each other with increasing force. Finally, the plate under the Indian Ocean broke loose and dove beneath the plate under Sumatra, causing an earthquake that measured 9.0 on the Richter scale — one of the strongest in this century. The quake moved the sea floor above it as much as 10 meters (about 33 feet) along a 600 mile long fault line, displacing an immense amount of water and setting off a tsunami that raced across the Indian Ocean at more than 500 miles per hour before slamming into coastlines as much as a thousand miles away.

And people wonder why.

Did God decide the coastal inhabitants of those nations should be punished?

According to an article on the *Christian Science Monitor* web site, a senior politician in Sri Lanka's west coast district told reporters that the tsunami was

sent by "Lord Buddha." O.G. Gurge said the wave was in retribution for the people's failure to care for the earth, and a judgment on a Buddhist nation where "corrupt priests drive around in big cars and don't pray enough."

A Buddhist monk named Sumana, speaking to the Associated Press, pointed to statues of Buddha near Galle, Sri Lanka. The Buddha images survived the tsunami intact while other nearby structures were demolished. The tsunami was a judgment against the people of Sri Lanka, he said. "Nature has given them some punishment because they are not following the path of the Lord Buddha. The people have to learn their lesson," he said.

In Banda Aceh, Indonesia, Islamic clerics were quick to label the devastation a warning to the faithful that they must more strictly observe their religion, including a ban on Muslims killing Muslims, according to the *Washington Post*. Cut Bukhaini, an imam, said "I hope this will lead all Muslims in Aceh to do what is in the Koran and its teachings. If we do so, God will be merciful and compassionate."

On the web site [www.watch.org](http://www.watch.org), self-styled commentator Bill

Koenig cited reports claiming that a disproportionate number of Christians miraculously survived the disaster, which he implied was a judgment on the surrounding nations, noting that eight of the 12 affected countries are known for persecuting Christians.

Even from before Deuteronomy was written, there have been many, including Job's friends, who assume that people get what they deserve — but tens of thousands of the victims were

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innocent children.

In Australia, the Anglican Dean of Sydney, Phillip Jensen, told the press that the tsunami and other natural disasters are a part of God's warning that judgment is coming.

Others have cited Jesus' warning in Matthew 24:7-8, where He was asked about the end of the world, and said that wars, famines, and earthquakes would precede the final judgment.

So, was the devastating earthquake and tsunami God's idea of a purposeful poke in the ribs to the spiritually sleepy?

Those who emphasize God's sovereignty might argue that, since God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, He actively controls every atom in the universe, including those that contributed to the disaster.

Others, while not denying God's sovereign rule, might question the level of control God chooses to have over natural phenomena. It is possible to believe that God has the ability to intervene as He sees fit in the natural world, without assuming that every disaster is the result of God's choice.

The Bible explains this with the story of "the fall," in Genesis 3. The story implies that God created Eden as a perfect par-

adise on earth, but when Adam and Eve sinned, they were thrust out of Eden and into the world where life is hard and bad things can happen. Human sin did not change the earth, but it left those who live on the earth more subject to its harsher elements.

The earth's crust rides on subterranean plates that move (albeit only a few inches per year) and interact with each other. Earthquakes come with the territory. That's how the world works. Volcanoes erupt, weather patterns change, storms form, rain falls, and

doesn't fall — that's the way the earth works.

Perhaps the lesson is not so much "God is mad at you and sent a tsunami to punish you," as it is "when you live near an active fault line, don't build your houses and hotels on the beach."

This is not to suggest that God cannot speak through natural disasters. In Luke 13:4-5, after Jesus was asked to comment on an act of government-sponsored terrorism, He pointed out that 18 people had recently been killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Those people were no worse sinners than the other inhabitants of Jerusalem, Jesus said.

When faced with a tragedy, the point is not to cast blame on either the victims or on God. The point is to learn from this that life is uncertain: it is wise to repent and trust God now, rather than putting it off until another day.

Troubles and trials, pain and sorrow have a way of getting our attention. In *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis said: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

We don't have to believe that God is the author of death and destruction in order to believe that God can speak to us, even in sorrow. □ — Cartledge is editor of the *Biblical Recorder* in North Carolina.