

# **Tsunamis, tragedy, and God: Where is our Father when his children hurt?**

**By Dr. Jim Denison**

Why does a good God allow bad things to happen to good people? The tragedy of tsunamis, earthquakes, landslides, and hurricanes are only the most recent events to call into question God's love, his power, or both. September 11, 2001, and the Holocaust of the previous generation, are equally problematic for those who believe God is all-powerful and all-loving. And each of us bears our own burdens, faces our own suffering and pain. A college professor said to me, "Son, be kind to everyone, because everyone's having a hard time."

## **What is the question?**

In theological language, we are dealing with the issue of "theodicy" (from Greek words for God--*theos*, and justice--*duke*). "Theodicy" was coined by the philosopher Wilhelm Leibniz in 1710. He defined his term, "The question of the compatibility of metaphysical, physical, and moral evil in the present world order with the justice and absolute power of God" (Leibniz, *Theodicee*, my translation).

The Bible is willing to ask Leibniz's question of its Author. Habakkuk complained to the God who allowed the devastation of his people at the hands of the Babylonians: "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?" (Habakkuk 1:3). Jesus cried from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

The medieval theologian Boethius provided the classic expression of our problem: "If God exists, from whence comes evil?" The pessimistic philosopher Schopenhauer spoke for many: "The shortness of life, so often lamented, may perhaps be the very best thing about it."

Christians are especially susceptible to this issue, because we believe three apparently contradictory facts to be equally true:

- God is all-loving.
- God is all-powerful.
- Evil exists.

As the Stoic philosopher Epicurus observed, the "solutions" to this dilemma are four:

- God wants to remove evil but is unable.
- God is able but unwilling.
- God is both able and willing; why doesn't he?
- God is neither able nor willing.

Can we defend the third approach with intellectual honesty? If so, how?

### **Popular but wrong approaches**

The easiest way to "solve" the problem of evil and suffering is to deny or minimize one of its three conditions. Regarding the love of God, we can agree with the ancient Stoics that everything is fated by God. They claimed that we are all dogs tied to carts. We can trot alongside the cart, or be dragged by it, but we're going with the cart.

The ancient Greeks saw their gods as capricious and immoral, Zeus throwing lightning bolts at those who displeased him. A common secular viewpoint today is that life is random coincidence, that if there is a "God" he has little interest in us. He is a clockmaker, watching his creation wind down.

We can also deny or minimize the power of God. Dualism argues that evil is coequal with good. From ancient Zoroastrianism to today, it has been popular to see God and Satan, good and evil locked in a battle for supremacy. J. S. Mill asserted that God is limited in his power; he loves us, but cannot do everything he would wish to help us. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his kind and sympathetic bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, agrees that even God is not able to do everything he wants to do.

A third wrong approach is to minimize the nature or existence of evil. The Hindu tradition views evil as *maya*, illusion. The ancient Greeks saw evil as the product of the material world, to be escaped through ascetic discipline and philosophical reflection. The Buddhist worldview treats evil as the product of wrong desires. Hinduism likewise believes that suffering results from wrong choices, as the *karma* we deserve.

One other wrong "solution" is to deny the existence of God altogether. David Hume, the 18th century "father of skepticism," proposed this syllogism:

- If God exists, he must be loving and powerful and thus eradicate evil.
- Evil exists.
- Therefore God does not exist.

While atheism says there is no God, "agnosticism" (from the Greek *gnosis*, knowledge, and *a*, no) asserts that we cannot know if he exists or not. Alternately, the "soft" agnostic admits that he or she does not (or cannot) know, without claiming that such knowledge is impossible for us all.

The existence of evil and suffering has perhaps motivated more people to question or reject the existence of God than any other factor.

### **Historical approaches**

Since theodicy is a problem as old as the Garden of Eden and the flood of Noah, Christian theologians have wrestled with it all through the history of our faith. Five basic approaches have been proposed most often.

### ***The spiritual warfare model***

Satan is very real. He murders and lies (John 8:44). He accuses the people of God (Job 1:9-11), resists the godly (Zechariah 3:1; Matthew 13:38-39), and tempts us to sin (1 Chronicles 21:1; Matthew 4:1). He has power over unbelievers (Acts 26:18; 2 Corinthians 4:3-4). He is a "roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

As a result, much of the evil and suffering in the world is attributable to his malignant work. Paul was clear: "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

However, not all suffering is the direct result of Satan's work. We live in a fallen world, in which natural disasters and disease are inevitable. People misuse their free will (see the second approach below). God permits some suffering for our greater good (see the third approach). Satan would like us to attribute all evil to him, giving him too much power; or blame nothing on him, pretending he doesn't exist. The right approach is to ask the Lord if there is a Satanic component to our suffering, and trust that he will guide us to the truth. If we are under attack, we can claim the power of God over our enemy and find victory in his Spirit and strength.

### ***The free-will theodicy***

Augustine (AD 354-430) is usually considered the greatest Christian theologian after Paul. His approach to the problem of evil and suffering can be summarized as follows:

- God created all that is.
- All that he created is good.
- Before the fall, evil was therefore "non-being," potential to be chosen but not yet reality.
- God created humanity with freedom of will.
- We used this freedom to choose evil.
- Our choice brought evil into existence, absolving God of blame.

There is much in Scripture to commend Augustine's approach. God gave us freedom of will (Genesis 3:15-17; Exodus 32:26; Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:15; 1 Kings 18:21). We were given this freedom so we could choose God and good (Matthew 4:10; Proverbs 1:10; 4:14; Romans 6:13; Ephesians 6:13; 2 Peter 3:17). Our free choice for wrong led to evil (James 1:13-15; 4:1). All people are now sinners (Romans 3:23). Our sin has resulted in a fallen world (Genesis 3:17; Romans 8:22).

Whenever evil is the product of our sinful choices, Augustine's approach explains its existence without blaming God. However, it does not account adequately for innocent suffering. Augustine would argue (correctly) that the tsunami is the product of a world which "fell" because of sin. But he could not explain why it would devastate Southeast Asia rather than some other part of the planet, or why so many innocent children would be affected. A philosopher will also ask, if man was created good by nature, why did he

choose to sin? If God gave us freedom of will and knew how we would choose to use it, is he not responsible for its use (at least to some degree)?

The free-will approach helps us understand why a person who chooses to abuse alcohol might die in a drunk driving accident. But it doesn't explain why the innocent driver of the other car had to die as well.

### ***The soul-building model***

Irenaeus (ca. AD 120-ca. 200) proposed an alternative approach to our problem:

- God created us to develop into perfect relationship with himself.
- He created the world as a place for that development.
- Evil is thus necessary as a means of our spiritual development ("soul-building").

The Bible does teach that some suffering comes from God (Deuteronomy 8:5; Job 16:12; Psalm 66:11; 90:7). We know that suffering can lead to good (Job 23:10; Psalm 119:67; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Hebrews 12:11; Revelation 7:14). Suffering can lead us to repentance (Jeremiah 7:3, 5, 7), and can refine us (Psalm 66:10; Isaiah 48:10; Malachi 3:3; 1 Peter 1:7; 4:17). Pain enables us to witness to our faith in God despite the hurt (2 Peter 2:12, 15; 3:15-16). And so God promises to use even difficult experiences for our good, to make us more like Jesus (Romans 8:28-29).

Irenaeus explains how evil could exist before Adam and Eve chose it. His approach also affirms the hope that God can redeem any suffering for his glory and our good. Problems with this approach include the fact that the "fall" it pictures is not as catastrophic as the event described in Genesis 3. The amount of evil in the world seems disproportionate to the present good; it is hard to argue that the lessening of anti-Semitism which resulted from the Holocaust justifies the horrors of that tragedy. This approach also struggles with the existence of Hell, since it is not a soul-building or redemptive reality.

### ***The eschatological model***

"Eschatology" deals with the future. Applied to theodicy, this approach asserts that evil will be resolved in the future, making present suffering endurable and worthwhile. Jesus promised that life leads to life eternal in glory (Jn 14:1-6), a paradise beyond our imagination (Revelation 21:1-5). We need not consider the present sufferings worth comparing with the glory to be revealed (Romans 8:18).

As a philosophical model, this approach offers the guarantee of absolute rational understanding. We do not comprehend the purpose of suffering now, but we will one day (1 Corinthians 13:12). All our questions will be answered. All the reasons why God has permitted suffering in our lives will be clarified. Our present faithfulness will be redeemed with future reward in glory (Revelation 2:10).

This approach does not offer explanation in the present, however. And some might wonder how this promise of future hope makes present courage possible.

### *The existential model*

The last model is more practical than theoretical: God suffers as we suffer, and gives us strength to withstand and even redeem our pain. The Bible affirms this assertion (2 Corinthians 4:1, 16; Ephesians 3:13; Hebrews 12:5; Revelation 2:3). God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). He weeps as we weep (John 11:35). Jesus experienced every temptation and pain we feel (Hebrews 4:15). He is present with us now in the sufferings of life (Deuteronomy 20:1; Psalm 34:18; Isaiah 43:2; Daniel 3:24-25; 12:6-7; Acts 16:25-26).

Philosophically, this approach is not a true theodicy. It offers no real explanation for the origin or existence of suffering. But it does provide the practical assurance that our Father walks with his children through the hardest places of life, and will never allow us to face more than he will give us the strength to bear (1 Corinthians 10:13).

### **Practical principles**

When the tsunami strikes, how can this theological discussion help us in practical ways? Here are steps to take in the storms of life.

First, utilize the *free-will* approach to examine the origin of suffering. Is there sin to admit? Is this pain in some way the result of your own misused freedom? If you are not sure, you may ask the Father. Take some time, a pen and paper, and invite the Spirit to show you anything wrong between you and God. Write down whatever comes to mind. This "spiritual inventory" is a useful regular practice. Confess specifically and genuinely whatever the Spirit reveals to you. Claim his forgiving grace (1 John 1:9). Make restitution to others when doing so is to their good (Luke 19:8). But do not assume that suffering is always your fault. Joseph, Job, and Jesus are clear evidence to the contrary.

Second, use the *soul-building* model to ask: what can you learn from this situation? How can you grow closer to God through this pain? Strive to be open to every source from which this spiritual growth can come--ask friends for counsel, seek the Spirit in prayer and Scripture, worship God even (especially) when it's hard. Stay close enough to Jesus to hear his voice and feel his transforming touch.

Third, use the *future hope* approach to ask: how can God redeem this present suffering for future good? How can he use your witness to touch the lives of people you may not even know? How will he reward your present faithfulness in the future and in glory? You may not be able to see the future, but you can believe that it is real.

One of my seminary professor explained the value of future hope this way: imagine that you are struggling financially (an easy thing for most seminary students to do). You're sitting down to a dinner of beans and hot dogs, when a knock comes at the door. A messenger is there with a letter notifying you that your very wealthy uncle will die in the next few days, and you will inherit a million dollars. You return to your beans and hot dogs, but don't they taste better?

Last, utilize the *existential* model to trust God's help in the midst of your pain. Know that he loves you, no matter how the world assesses or treats you. He will always be your Father, if you have asked Jesus Christ to be your Lord. Nothing can take you from his hand (John 10:28). He will enable you to withstand this trial, until the day he takes you home to glory.

## **Conclusion**

I will never respond to an issue of more practical or perennial relevance than this one. Even when the tsunami in Southeast Asia is a distant tragic memory, there will be another disaster in the news, and in our lives. The biblical and theological principles we have discussed are approaches to the various kinds of suffering we experience. But the enduring hope and strength to face our trials with courage comes from the God we trust and serve.

He promises that nothing can separate us from his love--not death or life, angels or demons, the present or the future, height or depth or anything else in all creation (Romans 8:38-39). We are never beyond the reach of his grace.

Now, where do you need his help and hope today? What hurting friend or family member is in need of God's love expressed through yours? God is all-loving and all-powerful, even though (and especially when) evil exists. This is the reasoned conclusion of our theological discussion. And far more important, it is the promise of God.