

BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS ?



Tsunami damage photos courtesy Rod Matthews

By John Halford

Whenever there is a major disaster, like the recent Indian Ocean tsunami, the media describes it as being 'of biblical proportions'. I suppose they feel that whereas ordinary catastrophes can be fitted into our own frame of reference, when something really awful happens, it can only be likened to things that happened 'in Bible times'.

Actually, we may have over estimated some of the great disasters mentioned in the scriptures, where hundreds of thousands of people seem to be involved. Many scholars doubt these huge numbers, claiming that we may be misinterpreting the use of the ancient languages. Like when we say 'I've told you a million times'. We know we don't mean it literally. But would someone two or three thousand years from now know that?

Be that as it may, why do we say that equally huge disasters, with massive casualties, are Biblical in proportion? It implies that it needs an act of God to produce a major disaster. That is nonsense.

Over a quarter of a million people died in the tsunami. That is tragic-

but many more than that have already died in the wake of the civil war in the Darfur region of central Africa. The mad man-made slaughter of Rwanda-Burundi ten years ago killed five times more than the Tsunami. No natural disaster was responsible for the tens of thousands who lost their lives in the 'ethnic cleansing' tragedy of the Balkans.

In 1937 the Japanese Imperial Army systematically slaughtered well over a quarter of a million Chinese in just one city. And we have recently commemorated the liberation of the mother of all man made disasters-the concentration camp at Auschwitz. All in all, the final death toll of the Second World War was about 60 million.

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The most destructive force on the planet is not an earthquake or a tsunami. It is unrepentant human nature. We don't need to blame God for misery and mayhem of 'Biblical proportions'. We are quite

capable of doing it by ourselves. Perhaps what we should be saying is that the disasters mentioned in the Bible sometimes seem to be 'of modern proportions.'

Jesus Christ could have calmed the tsunami wave. But perhaps if we asked him 'Why didn't you stop it?' his answer might be 'Why don't you stop your destructive behaviour?'

In fact, it was.

Sinners above all?

Jesus was once asked why God allowed people to be caught up in tragedy. The Romans had slaughtered some people even as they were conducting a religious service to honour God.

"About that time some people came up and told him about the Galileans Pilate had killed while they were at worship, mixing their blood with the blood of the sacrifices on the altar.

Jesus replied, as he often did, with another question. "Do you think those murdered Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Not at all. Unless you turn to God, you too will die.'

He then reminded them of a recent accident in Jerusalem. "And those



On the morning of 8 October 2005 the most devastating earthquake to hit Northern Pakistan & Kashmir caused extensive damage to life, property and the infrastructure. Measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale, entire villages and communities were wiped out. Survivors had to endure a chilled winter in the months ahead. Photo courtesy www.humanappeal.org, @Dimnetti; Agency: stockx-change.com

eighteen in Jerusalem the other day, the ones crushed and killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them, do you think they were worse citizens than all other Jerusalemites? Not at all. Unless you turn to God, you too will die." He was referring not just to temporary physical death. He wanted them to avoid a far more drastic loss.

That may not sound very encouraging. But Jesus was helping them understand these events by shifting their question from 'Why didn't God stop it' to 'Why don't you stop it?'

Stop what? Stop living as we do; selfishly, greedily, only pausing to think of the consequences of our actions and the meaning and purpose of life when we are confronted with tragedy.

Only human

Jesus used the accident at Siloam to remind them that life as we know it is fragile and temporary. We are not made to be indestructible. Not yet.

Jesus knew of another kind of life—a life that transcends the physical realm. He said, 'I am come that they may have life and that they may

have it more abundantly.' He meant eternal life — living forever, not subject to death, sickness, accidents, tsunamis or any of the other things that can eliminate our temporary existence. And that is what he wants for us.

We so easily forget the temporary nature of this phase of our existence. The human race has indeed carved out much of the earth, with freeways, canals, dams, tunnels and bridges. Just a few days before the tsunami, the highest bridge ever built was opened in France. Soaring 343 metres above the Tarn valley, it is certainly a wonder of the modern world.

We think we can conquer any obstacle, until the earth hiccups and a tsunami wipes out hundreds of years of progress in a few seconds.

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God's creation has a way of reminding us that we are still 'only human'. And until we learn to control ourselves, it is better we remain only human. The 270,000+ killed by the tsunami is a shocking figure, but it is not so large compared to some of the man-made disasters.

We are quite capable of mega-slaughter and destruction, without the help of nature. We are not yet ready for the full potential of eternal life. So God started us off in safe mode.

Starting in safe mode

Have you ever started your computer in safe mode? It is what you do when something is going wrong,

and you need to work with your system with greatly reduced power. It can be quite a depressing experience.

Only some of your familiar programs work, and those that do seem to stumble along slowly and painfully. Graphics are grainy, without the vibrant colours and high resolution that most monitors are now capable of giving. It is computing, but not as we know it. But you need to operate in this 'low life' version while you are getting the bugs out of the system. With full power you could do some real damage.

There is a lot of power 'out there' in the environment in which we shall spend eternity. We are not ready to handle it. So God prepared a 'powered down' nursery in which we could spend this first, physical stage of life. It bears some resemblance to the 'real thing'. But all life in this temporary realm is subject to decay and eventually death.

Back to normal

For a short time the world was united in trying to help the victims of the tsunami. It brought out the best in us. But it wasn't long before life returned to normal. Soldiers returned to fighting their civil wars. Arms dealers returned to selling their weapons to anyone able to provide the cash. Drugs barons, living in luxury, continued to slowly destroy the lives of vulnerable people.

Jesus came to show that there was another way to live to prepare for the real life he wants us to have.

He didn't promise that living his way of life would take Christians out of the world and all its pain and suffering. But by choosing to follow and obey him, people are given a whole new perspective on reality and an assurance of an eternal life in the world to come. Nothing that man or nature can do is able to stand in the way of that.

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