

TSUNAMI sermon, December 30th 2004 • Chris Rowney

Transcript

Two days before Christmas I got a call from a friend during which they passed on some news about a couple we both knew from a church we used to attend in Canberra.

The husband in this couple was someone we had come to know and love and who felt a call to go to the NT and translate the Bible for Aboriginal languages. After he had been there a number of years he married another of the translation workers in the region.

We were very happy for them, they had married somewhat later and were both lovely people. They had two sons...

The news was that a few days earlier on a break in Alice Springs, the wife had woken and was unable to speak, they went for tests and were told she had previously undiscovered tumours, basically inoperable. They said they could operate and perhaps give her two months to live, or leave her and give her maybe only days.

I was sad and somewhat stunned.. and thought about the questions of why God allows such things, of how we still feel so keenly the sorrow and sting of death. As of this morning I don't know any more news of that couple...

Then on Boxing Day we all became aware of personal tragedy and pain repeated on a vast scale, in numbers that continue to grow with each news report.

Every one of those now 125,000 is a you, or an I...

Do we simply despair and see no reason to life or death, or do we through our faith have something more?

WHAT DO WE FEEL? WHAT DO WE ASK? WHAT DO WE LEARN?
WHAT DO WE DO?

What do we ask?

Two different papers on Thursday this last week had editorials relating ‘God’ to these events.

In the SMH Edward Spence, a Philosopher states that **“Waves of destruction wash away belief in God's benevolence”**

And in The Age Kenneth Nguyen, a staff writer for the paper asks “Is God to Blame for This?”

Why has God done this?

Or if you don't want to make God sound quite so active as the CAUSE.

Why has God allowed this.. or even..

Where is God in this?

Perhaps you have asked yourself these things, or been asked them this past week..

In the SMH Edward Spence poses what he sees as ‘the problem’ like this.

“Traditionally, the ... Christian God, considered the most supreme and perfect being in the universe, has been ascribed the following necessary attributes: omniscience (all-knowing), omnipresence (present everywhere at all times and at once), omnipotence (almighty and powerful) and benevolence (all good and caring).

How, then, did a God as powerful and benevolent as this allow such a thing to happen? If he is benevolent then he cannot also be omnipotent, for a God who has both these attributes would have wanted to, cared to.... and been able to ...prevent such a catastrophe.”

In a different world, people like him would say, a loving caring and powerful God would not directly cause, or even allow other causes to bring about such pain and suffering.

What is the answer.. is there an answer?

If there is one, then I think that the answer to that is simply this..

There is no different world.. and perhaps there cannot be...

So am I saying that God **COULD NOT**,do anything about this earthquake? And the pain it has brought.

Well you know.. God **HAS DONE SOMETHING ABOUT THAT PAIN!..** but I’ll come to that a little later..

Some people are able to face events like this by saying we just don't understand and God allowed it because somehow something good will come of it, and he sees the big picture, we do not... to say GOD IS IN CONTROL.. so it must be all right..

I am not entirely comfortable with such an answer..

Even God cannot make a square circle. For it would no longer be a circle, but a square.

Perhaps it is true that God could also not make a world on which we could live, that did not include the possibility of volcanos, earthquakes, fires, droughts..

To live we need a world that rotates, that turns, a consequence of this is changing weather patters.. to live we need a world with a molten core and mantle, otherwise there would be no magnetism and if that was so there would be no atmosphere and we would not live.. but to have a molten core and mantle that is rotating generating magnetism the crust on the surface may shift and so earthquakes may occur. Just as God could not make a square circle, for it would then be a square, God also could not make a world on which we could live as real people, with the minds and wills that make us "us".. that had no possibility of earthquake or flood.

In a very real sense I believe that just as you and I have 'freedom' that means we are real people and not zombies or robots, and just as that freedom means there is the very real possibility that **we** may do or cause evil or pain. That The world itself has a 'freedom' ..

God IS in control and God DOES see a bigger picture.. but that picture is that he wanted to make a world with you and I able to be his voluntary friends, for that is the only friendship that is real.. and God is in control, in as much as he has somewhat relinquished some control in giving us that freedom to act and to choose, and while I may be wrong, I think that type of freedom cannot just be given to us without it also somehow being in all of creation.

If God as defined by some people, to be good, must intervene with power in **one** situation, then surely to be good (by that definition) he must need to intervene with power in **all** situations, where then is our genuine freedom, our genuine choice, our genuine humanity?

We must resist the temptation to DEFINE God, but rather all we can do is DESCRIBE Him.. as we know Him...

But God does intervene with power sometimes, and doesn't at others.

Why some pray and are healed and some pray and are not I do not know, But I do know some pray and are healed.

Why some see a close escape as the hand of God and others perish I do not know, But I do know some escape.

We can and do pray for healing, for safety, for God to change and preserve us from pain and loss, , but if God is our God only in the time of healing, what then? In those times, like for the couple that are our friends, or the tens of thousands caught up in the events of this week...

When that the loss comes, what do we do then?

Deny the reality of the loss? That is dishonest

Sheet the blame on our lack of faith or someone else's? That is foolish

Lose hope and fall into despair? That is lifeless...

Some people will look at the events of this week and say that if the Christian God can cause or allow such an event then he is not a very nice God, and so they will choose to reject and neglect Him.

Some people will look at the catastrophe and say it proves what they felt they already knew, that there can be no God..

But we must not allow that to happen to us, we must instead look to events like these and know that there is a God, and as Christianity has declared to us this God is a God who "so loved the world"..

But has God really sat back watching, loving but unable to do anything? How can we avoid falling into lifeless despair? Because God HAS acted...

God has not sat as an all powerful omnipotent ruler and chosen to do nothing in this event, or done nothing because he knows that some consequence will be better than the event itself.. But rather, like any loving parent caring for a child God has loved and has done all he can for them...and for us.

How can I say that... done all he can? If you have read the papers and letters that I have you would see many blaming God (who they choose not to believe in) for doing nothing!.

I said before and I have to believe this is true.. that God has already done something about the pain and suffering...

This is where once more we find that the God we have come to worship today, is not like the Gods that many others in this world come before...

We find pain ultimately to be in the death, and in what we feel is the untimely deaths of so many...

But death is common to all mankind. The only question regarding death for those in this recent disaster, and indeed for all of us, is one of when, where and how...

Death is a great equaliser...

Death highlights the important in our lives...

Death begs the question is this all there is? Or is there more?

The atheist and Agnostic may look at this and ask How can there be a God to allow such tragedy.

I look and ask How can there *not* be?.. For if there is not, then there is no hope, no comfort, no justice, no joy

BUT HOPE is central to Christians.., Hope that beyond death is something more.

As Paul call it in Corinthians.. the ‘Eternal weight of Glory’ that makes such things as this seem in comparison to be ‘momentary light afflictions’!

Does that mean they are not heart wrenchingly sad situations and stories.. no.. PLEASE Know that I don’t want to minimise the very real pain and hurt that is in this and any loss...

But it is what we can hopefully find when we place an eternal weight of glory on the balance on one side, and the pain on the other..

If we put on a balance one Gold brick on one side and three on the other .. that doesn’t make the one suddenly become Cow dung or straw.. it is gold, but it is outweighed.

I don’t mean to.. I cannot! Make light of the pain involved in so many aspects of our lives... but unless I want to give up now, I have to hold on as Paul did to an eternal weight of Glory..

The only way we can make sense of this is to see that there is more.

So how does this help us with God and the question of WHAT HE HAS DONE about this?

Well what he has done has been to REDEEM..

Some people might say that God **CAUSES ALL THINGS** to happen for the good of those, but no, the Bible tells us that whatever the cause, God **WORKS IN ALL THINGS**...

“28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Romans 8:28, NIV.

I believe above all else that we need to know God as our Redeemer..

I had already finished writing this Sermon on Friday when I got an email from someone that we as a church support who is a missionary elsewhere in Indonesia, and in it there is this one line..

I believe that our Father can redeem all situations, no matter how devastating they are, We worship a God of Grace...

I may be wrong in some details but as I understand it, Islam is strong on the will of God, or KISMET. Whatever will be will be... God is a God of Power...

While, like Christianity, Islam is monotheistic, worshipping one God, who they also see as the God of Abraham... and while the Jews worship the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob... And along with Power they also see God as having compassion..

What is different for us as followers of Christ, is that is we believe GOD came and lived amongst us AS ONE OF US, knowing pain and suffering, and who went beyond just sharing with us, he not only stepped down, but he stepped up again.

We cannot make Christianity just some pithy teaching on how to live together nicely.. to do that it has no power... and Paul knew that.

Writing to the Corinthians, where some teachers had wanted to make them revert to being 'Good Jews and to live only for the here and now and had taught against any life after death Paul says this...

1 Corinthians.

“12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”

1 Corinthians 15:12-14, NIV.

“15 More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised.

16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.

17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.

18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

Then there is this....

19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”

1 Corinthians 15:15-19, NIV.

If it is only for this life that we live.. then my heart is, and will remain forever broken thinking of our friends in the Northern territory,... then my mind is numbed and will remain forever so at the scale of loss and death in South East Asia this past few days...

But Paul did not stop there, he went on and so must I.....

51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed-

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52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

55 “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1 Corinthians 15:50-57, NIV.

I asked as I began this morning.

WHAT DO WE FEEL? WHAT DO WE ASK? WHAT DO WE LEARN?
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Hopefully we learn that whatever the question, we can answer that God is a God of love and of mercy, and he has not done nothing, but he has done everything that will draw us to live eternally with him.

What if the victims didn't know Jesus, you might want to ask me.. well I answer that Jesus knew them..

and while I don't know all things I know that God is as I have said a God of love and mercy.

If we concentrate on, if we come to God on the basis of His power, then we will wonder why his power did not stop such an event.. But to seek after power is not to know God as a Christian, but is to practice witchcraft or superstition.. those things are about having or using power.

We need in the midst of such an event to come to God as we always should, on the basis of his love, his grace.. He is our Father.. he is our Friend..

SO What do we do?

Well, if you feel challenged about facing death, either your own or another's then perhaps we need to pray with you and open your heart to the God who wants to give you the sort of assurance he gave to Paul.

But what else can we do?

It is ludicrous sometimes that people ask “What is God doing about this tragedy”.. When God is asking right back “What are you doing?”

We can feel.. we can share something of their human condition, and we can pray.

God does not want us to waste our sorrow, but to take it and pray.

AND..

We can give, our time as we pray and of our material wealth to help.

After we close now there will be an opportunity for you to give, either directly into the offering bowl here on the centre table, or you can take the forms to do it later. If you want a receipt fill out the accompanying card and put it with the donation and these will all be forwarded.

So now.. as a CD plays come and give, or sit and pray, then I will pray a benediction and we will have some morning tea.