
Waves of Destruction

Why Does God Permit Humanity to Suffer?

As we struggle to come to terms with the great Asian earthquake and the catastrophic tsunamis that followed in its wake, we may be asking questions like, 'Where was God' and, 'Why didn't He prevent this tragedy?'

Each daily newspaper has published several pages every day covering the ongoing effects of the deadly tsunamis in Southeast Asia. Mounting death-toll statistics mix with poignant accounts of tragic personal losses of family and friends. But there are also encouraging stories of incredible heroism and a groundswell of empathy expressed in generous contributions from the Western nations and from countries all over the world.

Inevitably many religious leaders reacted with a desire to give both their followers and the general public a philosophical framework in which to deal with these unacceptable events. Some responses might be rather surprising to our readership.

The title of one article was, 'If this was an act of God – what was God thinking?' The Archbishop of Canterbury headlined his own article, 'Of course, this makes us doubt God's existence.' He went

on to elaborate in the text: 'The question – "How can you believe in a God who permits suffering on this scale?" is therefore very much around at the moment, and it would be surprising if it weren't – indeed, it would be wrong if it weren't. The traditional answers will get us only so far' (*The Sunday Telegraph*, 2 Jan).

Where was God?

Actually most of the many newspaper accounts attributed the burgeoning tide of death to the awesome power unleashed by our own planet. The term 'nature' was used over and over again, implying some sort of force involved beyond our reason or understanding.

We acknowledge our own fragility in the face of this terrifying demonstration of what we call 'nature's power'. As noted British columnist William Rees-Mogg stated in *The Times*: 'We are not in control; the tsunami has demonstrated this ancient truth' (17 Dec 2004).

In the Bible we find that natural disasters like tornados and hurricanes are sometimes associated with the activities of Satan the devil. The patriarch Job suffered greatly at the hands of the devil. God allowed this to happen to Job for a great spiritual purpose. After he had learned the lesson, God gave him twice as much as he had before (Job 42:10-16).

This tragic scenario, however, illustrates the power of Satan as the on-site ruler of this present world and demonstrates his eagerness to bring suffering on humankind. This is *not* to say that he is behind every disaster like this latest earthquake, or every personal misfortune, but to highlight his harmful influence during 'this present evil age' (Galatians 1:4). The devil has the power to spread misery throughout his domain. The apostle Paul acknowledged the devil's position by calling Satan 'the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now

works in the sons of disobedience' (Ephesians 2:2).

So the question remains: Why does God allow such devastation to take place, and what should our reaction be?

Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth of Nations, offered the following: 'The simplest explanation is that of the 12th-century sage, Moses Maimonides. Natural disasters, he said, have no explanation other than God, by placing us in a physical world, set life within the parameters of the physical. Planets are formed, tectonic plates shift, earthquakes occur, and sometimes innocent people die. To wish it were otherwise is in essence to wish that we were not physical beings at all' (*The Times*, 1 Jan).

Responding to disaster

Jesus called to mind a disastrous accident in teaching us all a very important lesson. Referring to a great tragedy in Jerusalem, He said: 'Those eighteen on whom the Tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were any worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; *but unless you repent* you will all likewise perish' (Luke 13:4-5, emphasis added throughout).

The fact that the majority of today's victims are Asian does not mean that they are greater sinners than the people in the West. (Remember that thousands of Western tourists are dead or missing in the areas affected.) This catastrophic event in Southeast Asia should be a wakeup call for all humanity now living.

It is our short-sighted way of life that brings on the potential for disaster. God has created a world of cause and effect. Proverbs 26:2 tells us that 'the curse does not come without a cause' (Bible in Basic English). Sometimes, however, there is a long time lapse between cause and consequence. This is what deceives humans into thinking that they can get away with their evil deeds (Ecclesiastes 8:11). Somehow we like to play Russian roulette with our precious lives.

This world is recklessly drinking iniquity (lawlessness) like water. We are removing ourselves further and further away from God and His righteous way of life, willingly rejecting His blessings and protection.

Reacting with real repentance

It's very encouraging, however, to see that the Western nations (including Britain) have immediately pledged hundreds of millions in disaster aid and begun airlifts of desperately needed supplies to these battered regions. This tradition of generosity and help for those in need is an outgrowth of these nations' long Judeo-Christian heritage and is to be highly commended.

But how should we *personally* react to a disaster of such enormous proportions – no matter how far away? Again Jesus Christ said not to take our lives and well-being for granted, as they can disappear in an instant due to circumstances beyond our control. *Personal repentance*, He said, is the only sensible response to disaster (Luke 13:1-5). This includes seriously rethinking life's priorities.

Consider our track record with the Ten Commandments. Our nations continually break God's great spiritual law of love to God

(Continued on page

Why Does Life Involve Suffering?

When major natural tragedies occur like the recent earthquake and tsunamis in Southeast Asia, the same questions are always asked: Where was God? How could He allow death and devastation on a scale such as this? Why doesn't God intervene to prevent suffering?

In addition to the accompanying article, the United Church of God has prepared and published a magazine-size, 16-page brochure in order to thoroughly address these questions – all of which have challenged theologians, philosophers, historians and scientists down through the generations.

This publication carefully considers the Scriptures that impact these questions and puts them into a framework in which they can be rightly understood. It explains such issues as free-will, cause and effect, the consequences of human decisions, Satan's role and influence – plus the good that can emerge from suffering and when suffering will ultimately cease.

The suffering of the Christian is an essential component of God's plan and purpose. If we suffer with Christ we shall also reign with Him in the Kingdom of God. This brochure also addresses how you can cope with personal sufferings in your life.

You need to request and read this unique publication. The title is *Why Does God Allow Suffering?* It's free for the asking. We have it readily available in print, or you can download it if you are on the Internet.



Good News Writer Visits Australia

In late September 2004, my wife Diana and I, and two close friends, travelled to Australia for an extended visit to that vast country. During our six-week stay, we covered several thousand kilometres. As a writer for The British & European Supplement, I immersed myself in the content of the media and talked to Australian citizens to get the feel of what is happening in the land down under.

The initial purpose for going to this southern hemisphere country was to attend an eight-day biblical harvest festival that had its origin among the peoples of ancient Israel, and was kept by Jesus Christ and the early New Testament Church. The Church Jesus founded continues to keep this Feast of Tabernacles or Ingathering (Exodus 23:16), although since the first century AD, the festival has highlighted the spiritual harvest in God's plan of salvation. (For further understanding, please request our free booklet

about *God's Holy Day Plan*.)

In our travels to Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and the small enclave of Canberra, seat of the national government, we found several things that impressed us. The first thing we noticed was the signs on the highways cautioning drivers not to speed excessively. In response we found the drivers very

reality of the Australian way of doing things is the friendly attitude of the people in the service industry to visitors.

The public transport system also merits a positive mention. We found it reliable, with the trains running on time, very clean and inexpensive.

Increasing trade with China

Although the Australian economy is registering noticeable growth at the present time, what could be a worrisome development to some observers is that China has now replaced the United States as its main trading partner. Manufactured goods made in China stream into this huge country, and Australian

technical expertise is China-bound. One Australian told me that the country is greatly profiting by its ever-closer economic dealings with the Republic of China, where according to Chinese statistics, the annual growth measures 10 percent.

During our stay, Australians voted John Howard back into office as prime minister with a surprising increased majority. The thriving

courteous, limiting their driving to the speed limit. It was a pleasure to drive in Australia, which registers a much lower per capita traffic fatality figure than the European Union.

Another enjoyable



Right: Cairns Zoo: The author, Gerhard Marx, holding a young crocodile rendered 'snapless' for the occasion by some sticky tape. *Above:* Brisbane: Centre of power (law and finance), overlooking the Brisbane River.

All photos by Winston Bothwell.



economy has of course helped in the election, but one main factor in the prime minister's re-election was his resolute conviction to fight terrorism. Many Australians realise



that they are targets of terrorism as well and are willing to give their support to those in government willing to fight it. Significantly, the United States has signed a trade agreement with Australia on account of that country's generous support in the fight against terrorism.

An ethical debate in Australia

A beautiful, spacious and prosperous land of less than 20 million, Australia does, nevertheless, have its problems. During our stay there was a debate in regard to abortion. The following quotations from Australian news sources show that the traditional view still exists alongside the liberal concept of sanctioning abortion for economic or convenience reasons. The heading on the Letters & Opinion section of *The Australian* (4 Nov

2004) reads: 'Abortion is a choice more women should be spared,' and quotes Selena Ewing of the Southern Cross Bioethics Institute in North Plympton, Western Australia:

'Most Australian women know that there is something deeply disturbing about killing unborn

babies . . . When we consider the heartbreaking circumstances leading to abortion, the long-lasting damage abortion does to women, and the deaths of 100,000 unborn babies each year, there is no question that there are too many abortions.'

Another individual wrote to *The Australian*: 'With abortion making headlines in the news again, I, too, would like to make a few comments. I was adopted at birth . . . [My parents'] friendship and love I deeply value to this day. One thing I am certain of. . . is that I cannot thank them enough for not aborting me. My life has great value to me! Surely the Judeo-Christian values our society is based on should share some of the thanks.'

Biblical values declining

But those traditional values are diminishing in Australia as elsewhere in the West. As the next headline shows: 'State schools need religion to instil values.' The text of the article reads: 'Public schools should put religion back on the curriculum as part of a values education push to enhance student

Australia in Bible Prophecy

Australia is a part of the Commonwealth, and historically it was one of the great dominions in the British Empire. Initially it was a refuge for political and religious prisoners, and later became a new land for many thousands of immigrants from Britain and Ireland who were seeking religious and economic freedoms not unlike the early colonists of America.

Here is one more country fulfilling our Creator's promise of the blessings of great national inheritance given to the descendants of the biblical patriarch Abraham (the father of many nations, Genesis 17:4) and to his son Isaac and grandson Jacob.

Notice the reconfirmation of God's promise to Jacob in Genesis 28:14: 'Also your descendants

shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west *and the east*, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed [progeny] all of the families of the earth shall be blessed' (emphasis added).

In this passage God spoke to the patriarch Jacob (father of 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel) from the point of view of physical Palestine.

One vast southern hemisphere region to the south-east comprises the nations of Australia and New Zealand. Remember that the descendants of Abraham were prophesied to spread around the earth.

To obtain the essence of the story of how this all happened, please request our free brochure *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.

wellbeing, and prevent the slide into substance addiction and suicide . . .

‘Murdoch University emeritus professor of education Brian Hill will tell a conference on student wellbeing that young people need to learn more about moral principles and values, and the world views underpinning them. “Australian state schools have been encouraged to factor the religious variable out of the curriculum, thereby leaving values education in freefall.”’

Professor Hill continued: ‘Increasingly, traditional values have been challenged and the available horizon of possibilities enlarged by ethnic diversification and novel technologies.’ (*The Australian*, 25 Oct 2004).

As is the case in Britain today, some observant people in Australia are reconsidering letting go of the

traditions and values based on firm biblical principles that our forefathers taught. They see Western moral values collapsing because society has largely abandoned the sound principles upon which the Western world was generally founded.

Declaring biblical principles

To this end, *The Good News* magazine (which has subscribers throughout Australia) and the British and European Supplement (distributed with *The Good News* here in Britain and Europe) are committed to declaring biblical principles that have withstood the test of time – moral laws that the Creator has made to benefit our well being.

*Gerhard Marx,
Minister, United Church of God*



Left page: Mrs Diana Marx makes friends with a koala. *This page:* Sydney Harbour Bridge from a ferry boat in the harbour; male kangaroo in warning mode, standing fully upright, beating his chest and displaying his claws in effort to scare off an interfering photographer; part of the rock formation called The Twelve Apostles, Great Ocean Road, Victoria.



Fellowshipping with Others

The United Church of God *British Isles* continues to plan additional meetings for study and fellowship. We have congregations in or near:

Birmingham
Bricket Wood, near St Albans, Herts
Chelmsford, Essex
Edinburgh
Gloucester
Preston, Lancs
Ramsey, Isle of Man
Tonbridge, Kent

We also have Bible Study groups in **Taunton**, Somerset; in **Belfast and Ballymena** in Northern Ireland, and in central **London**. We have plans to start others as our human and financial resources allow.

The United Church of God also has ordained ministers available for baptism counsel or answering your questions about the Bible.

If you are interested in attending any of these groups, counseling with a minister, or desire fellowship in other areas, please contact us at:

PO Box 705, Watford WD19 6FZ
E-mail info@ucg.org.uk
Telephone: 020 8386 8467

Your contacting us will help us choose areas for future meetings. Please include your phone number and/or email address.

2004: A Year of Natural Disasters

In 2004 we witnessed a succession of killer disasters which took the lives of many, many thousands and caused worrisome concern to the insurance industry.

Do we have the spiritual insight to grasp the signs of our time? In His last major prophecy before His crucifixion, Jesus said one of the signs of His return to this earth would be earthquakes in various places (Matthew 24:7). In the same sentence, He also mentioned pestilences (or diseases), which often follow in their wake. We've yet to see the full fallout from this latest monster earthquake in South Asia.

Our free brochure *Are We Living in the Time of the End?* helps to explain these tragic events in the context of our modern age. British columnist William Rees-Mogg summarised our present plight nearly 2000 years distant from the time of Christ. '*Mankind has built a fragile home for itself*, with the growth of the world's population, the exploitation of natural resources, the spread of diseases from overcrowding and modern transport, the dependence on modern technologies, some of which are very vulnerable to upheaval, and the tall buildings which are open to

terrorism. *That fragility is the real danger of the modern world*' (27 Dec, emphasis added throughout).

Strong indications are that we are headed in the direction of the ultimate expression of what the apostle Paul observed in Romans 8:22, 'For we know that *the whole creation groans and labours with birthpangs* until now.'

Make no mistake about it. A new utopian age is going to be born on this earth when these horrific natural disasters will be buried deep in the past. We live now in a time of uneasy and even chaotic transition, yet (when we come to understand it) in firm expectancy of a new world of peace, prosperity and plenty.

God is preparing a specially trained people to help rule the earth with Jesus Christ when He returns. As Paul put it: 'For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the Sons of God' (Romans 8:19).

To understand much more fully, please request or download our free booklets *What Is Your Destiny?* and *The Gospel of the Kingdom*.

Why Does God Permit Suffering?

(Continued from page 2)

and neighbour with impunity, and then we wonder why bad things happen.

When God sent His prophets to warn ancient Israel, the inhabitants often reacted by stoning them. Later He sent His very own Son and they murdered Him. Then the Church Jesus built was assigned the task. It is still on the job, guided by the resurrected Christ. But few today really and truly like to hear where their misguided way of life is taking them.

One of the purposes of this preaching of the gospel of the kingdom is a call to repentance (Luke 24:47). If you are stealing in

some way, heed the words of the apostle Paul: 'Let him that stole steal no more.' If you are tempted to have an affair, remember the words of the book of Hebrews: 'Marriage is honourable in all and the bed undefiled, but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.' Jesus simply said to a woman He had forgiven: 'Go and sin no more.'

No matter what course your neighbour or the nation as a whole may take, you can turn from your sins and begin to live a righteous life by the indwelling of Jesus Christ through the power of God's Holy Spirit (Galatians 2:20). As a reader of *The Good News* and this Supplement, you are most likely being called to repentance by your Creator.

Our collective prayers and what-

ever assistance we feel motivated to offer should be directed to the victims of the Asian tsunamis. And at the same time, don't leave your personal life to the vagaries of time and chance. Act now by requesting our free booklet *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.

John Ross Schroeder

Recommended Reading

The issue of suffering is impossible to thoroughly address in all of its points in one brief article. To help you to understand the whole background, the United Church of God has prepared and published a free *Bible Study Course*. Lesson 4 is entitled *Why Does God Allow Suffering? Why not enrol today?*

Questions & Answers

Q: Which religion is the right one?

B E, London

A: The only way to identify the true religion is to look at its origin and see whether it is human or divine. If the source of the religion is the true God, then the moral teachings will be godly and will benefit all that embrace them.

There can, of course, be only one right and true religion. There is a source available which reveals a perfect morality – the Judaeo-Christian Bible comprised of both Old and New Testaments.

Some issues we could consider when addressing this question include:

- Who can improve on the Ten Commandments delivered and codified on Mount Sinai (Exodus chapter 20) as the fundamental laws in regulating human society and setting the moral tone of how to live.
- Who can find fault with the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7) which provides humanity with the ultimate spiritual, altruistic guide on how to conduct one's life?
- What other source gives all human beings who embrace the morality of the Bible forgiveness of past sins and the sure hope of everlasting life in the Kingdom of God?

Due to space limitations we will only discuss the first of these issues in this column. The Ten Commandments, originally given in the Old Testament, with their

expanded spiritual application presented in the New Testament, have never been improved on as a body of law, in spite of the passage of two millennia and more. The laws of God and their spiritual intent stand light years apart from any humanly devised laws. These divine laws have stood the test of time and are relevant and applicable at all times, for all occasions and for all peoples.

Throughout history no empires, nations or peoples have ever claimed authorship of the Decalogue. The Jews, although linked historically to the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, have denied that they were the originators of the Ten Commandments. In their sacred writings, themselves divinely inspired, they have always claimed that the Ten Commandments were written by the finger of God (Exodus 31:18).

This firm belief remained with them well into New Testament times. The apostle Paul reminded his readers that 'to them were committed the oracles of God' (Romans 3:2).

In order to consider this and other issues raised above in more detail, please continue to read *The Good News*, this Supplement and other related literature advertised in their pages. *The Good News* stands in the forefront of focusing the reader's attention away from man-made traditions and directly to the source of the true religion, the inspired Word of God – the Bible. In that divine source, you will find the ultimate answer to your question, 'Which religion is the right one?'

Additional helps are freely available in our booklets *Is the Bible True?*, *Who Is God?*, and *The Church Jesus Built*. Also request our 12-lesson *Bible Study Course* which addresses this basic issue in detail. You can request this material in printed form or download it if you are on the Internet.

Q: I would like to know if the King James Version is the best version I can refer to. If not, which one is?

L T, Nigeria

A: In our publications we quote primarily from the New King James Version (NKJV) because of its overall accuracy, plus the fact that the wording used in this modern translation is up to date and easy to understand.

The NKJV also remains faithful to the spirit of the original King James Version (also known as the Authorised Version), a classic translation of unquestionable value that is still very popular and profitably read by millions to this day.

Useful translations in modern English include the New International Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the Revised English Bible and the New American Standard Bible. No translation is 100 percent correct. In order to compare, it is very helpful to have more than one translation on hand.

You can find more helpful information by requesting our free reprint article *Which Bible Translation Should I Use?*



Letters from Our Readers

Doing the work of God

I was so pleased to receive your magazine. I admire your courage and strength. I know that God will always give you the power that you need to continue your work. We must serve the people that need our help. I want to share the gospel with other people.

N K, Greece

To all the most sincere people within the United Church of God: Thank you so very much for continuing to send me not only *The Good News*, but also *The British and European Supplement*. All I ask of you is to please keep up with your work. All of those among you who have the strength, vision, will and means to help people such as me have my most profound respect and admiration.

R B, Camberley, Surrey

Thank you for sending me your magazines. Whenever I read one, I don't want to put it down as I gain more understanding. Your ministry is a blessing. Silver and gold I don't have, but I do thank you from the bottom of my heart. I pray that men and women will go out of their way to bless your ministry and the cup of your finances shall never run dry.

B D, Battersea, London

• *As imperfect human beings we can take no personal credit for the work God is doing (Acts 15:4). We do, however, deeply appreciate the prayers and support we receive from our readership.*

'Binge Drinking: Is It Really Fun?'

Binge drinking (*Good News Supplement*): As a man (OAP) who drinks on a daily basis, I learned a great deal from your article. I am very grateful.

Mr G E, Blackwood

Moral teaching important

I disagree with you on certain points of doctrine, but so very much appreciate your clear statements and explanations in all of your articles. I often use points from your moral teachings when speaking to my grandchildren.

T M, Sutton Coldfield, W Midlands

Creation or evolution?

This week I received your publication *Creation or Evolution: Does It Really Matter What You Believe?* I felt compelled to write to you straight away and congratulate all the contributing writers on a first class work. It should be read by everyone as a tool for education, truth and knowledge.

G M F, Eastleigh, Hants

More information needed

I have been given one of your publications, *The Ten Commandments*. I find it interesting. Could you please give me more information on your organisation?

Mr G S A, Powys, Wales

• *Our free brochure This Is the United Church of God and a special introductory copy of The Good News have been posted to you.*

Where to keep the Sabbath

How can I go to church on the Sabbath on Saturday when all the churches worship on Sunday? Only Jews, Messianic Jews and yourselves appear to worship on the Sabbath. It worries me.

Mrs D N, Tangmere, W Sussex

• *The United Church of God has church congregations and Bible studies in the British Isles, including Northern Ireland. All meet on the seventh-day Sabbath. The frequency of meetings is based on interest in the area and the human and financial resources with which God has blessed us. We are establishing new places of meeting as quickly as our resources will reasonably allow. For more specific information, please see the box, 'Fellowshipping with Others' on page 5 of this issue.*

How our literature is funded

The United Church of God *British Isles* is registered as a charity in England and Wales (number 1079192). The publication of this Supplement and other literature is funded by the generosity of members of the Church, co-workers and our readers. Following Jesus Christ's instruction (Matthew 10:8), it is supplied free of charge so that His message can be made available to all. We are grateful to those who assist financially in the work done by *The Good News*. Donations may be sent to: *The United Church of God, PO Box 705, WATFORD WD19 6FZ*. Euro donations can be transmitted to our Euro bank account using the IBAN: GN63 NWBK 6072 1027 0225 87. IBAN BIC: NWBK GB 2L.