The Tsunami Disaster: A Sea of Sorrow

"All these are the beginning of sorrows."
—Matthew 24:8

THE SCRIPTURE TEXT "All these are the beginning of sorrows" (Matt. 24:8), identifies the momentous events that were prophesied to take place during the closing years of the present Gospel Age. The word 'sorrows' has been translated from the Greek word meaning birth pang, or travail. The word travail, instead of sorrow, may be found in many modern translations of the Bible. It describes the increasing level of violence and chaos that has occurred during this present time. Many students of the Bible associate the events of our day with those foretold prophecies which were written long ago. This is especially true since the beginning of World War I. Since that time, the history of mankind has been identified by tremendous upheavals due to worldwide wars and revolution that are disrupting the long-established kingdoms and institutions of earth.

It is noted that environmental and weather patterns are also being disrupted by violent changes, some of which have come about largely because of large-scale industrialization and pollution. These natural disasters have come upon a world that is becoming increasingly complex. This is particularly true because of the rapid increase in population that has occurred since the earlier days of the twentieth century which, in turn, have affected greater concentrations of people. Many of the world's largest cities have been built in vulnerable locations along seacoasts. Mankind has also been affected by the rapid increase in communication and travel during this time. As the world grows closer together, more people are aware of what is happening in what were once considered to be remote places.

A SEA OF SORROW

The lead article reporting the unprecedented carnage that occurred in the Indian Ocean region of southern Asia on December 26, 2004, appeared in *Time* magazine (Jan. 10, 2005) under the title, "Sea of Sorrow." The subheading of Michael Elliott's report reads: "The world suffers an epic tragedy as a tsunami spreads death across Asia. An on-the-scene look at how it happened—and whether the carnage could have been avoided."

The devastating events that took place on that day happened during the holiday season, which is a usual time of worship and festivity among many different religious faiths throughout the world. It also happened during the height of the tourist season. Countless peoples from many northern countries in Europe and other places regularly schedule

their vacations there during the winter months for warmth and relaxation. They certainly were not expecting the carnage in human life and property that occurred on that day.

MODERN WORLD'S GREATEST TRAGEDY

This tragedy has been called the greatest natural disaster to occur in modern times, and one of the most destructive in all of human history. The wide scale and terrible devastation that occurred was the result of one of nature's most powerful upheavals—an earthquake and its subsequent tsunami tidal waves. The overwhelming and widespread loss of life and property has caused tremendous grief and fear around the world. Many from all faiths are seeking answers from their spiritual leaders during this time of untold sorrow. Others are asking why God would ever permit such a tragedy to happen to his human creation.

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

In Elliott's report he stated, "The cause of the carnage was a massive earthquake that trembled the earth's crust off the western coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, setting off through the oceans shock waves that were felt more than 5,000 kilometres away on the coast of East Africa, where at least two hundred people died. Bustami, a fisherman from the Sumatran village of Bosun, is one who experienced the quake and tsunami and lived to tell about them. Sometime after 7:30 on the morning of December 26, he says he was on his boat just off the coast when he felt the sea moving around him. 'That must have been when the earthquake hit', he says. (The precise time of the shock

was 7:58 a.m.) About half an hour later came the shock wave–the tsunami–that devastated the region. At first, Bustami saw water retreat from shore, with fish jumping around on the empty beaches. Then, he says, 'I heard this strange thunderous sound from somewhere, a sound I'd never heard before. I thought it was the sound of bombs.' The water rose behind him as high as the coconut trees on the shoreline, and he was thrown off his boat. 'It felt like doomsday,' says Bustami, who, after clinging to a coconut tree, was eventually picked up by a soldier three hours later, almost three kilometres away from where he had lost his boat."

NO WARNING

International media have tried vigorously to keep up with the rapid pace of events that have followed this unprecedented tragedy. A *CNN.com* International news item for December 28, 2004 under the caption, "Race to Save Tsunami Survivors," reported that "the tsunami struck with no warning at those coastal areas—particularly Indonesia, so close to the source—as no warning system exists for the Indian Ocean, according to the director of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Pacific Marine and Environmental Labs in Seattle, Washington.

"Such tsunamis are much more common around the Pacific Rim than in the Indian Ocean. The quake represented the energy released from a rupture in the earth's crust more than 600 miles (1,000 kilometers) long, the U.S. Geological Survey's National Earthquake Information Center (NEIC) said. It was the strongest earthquake since 1964

and tied a 1952 quake in Kamchatke, Russia, as the fourth strongest since measurements began in 1899. The quake hit a year after the 6.6 magnitude quake in Bam, Iran, which killed more than 30,000 people, injured another 30,000 and destroyed 85 percent of the buildings in the city."

WIDESPREAD DAMAGE

Fox News for December 28, 2004 said that, "Sunday's massive quake of 9.0 magnitude off the Indonesian Island of Sumatra sent 500mph waves surging across the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal in the deadliest known tsunami since the one that devastated the Portugese capital of Lisbon in 1755 and killed an estimated 60,000 people." The report indicated that "Scores were also killed in Malaysia, Bangladesh and the Maldives. The giant waves raced nearly 3,000 miles to east Africa, causing deaths in Somalia, Tanzania and the Seychelles.

"In the Sri Lanka area, around 1,000 people were dead, or missing, from a train that was flung off its tracks when the gigantic waves hit. Rescuers pulled 204 bodies from the train's eight carriages–reduced to twisted metal—and cremated, or buried, those bodies next to the railroad track that runs along the coast."

Reuters, reporting from Banda Aceh (December 30, 2004) said, "Millions of people on Indian Ocean shores scrambled for food and clean water, with disease and hunger now the main threats stalking survivors of the most devastating tsunami on record. Many villages are now little more than mud-covered rubble, blanketed with corpses after a 9.0 magnitude underwater quake off the Indonesian

Island of Sumatra triggered the tsunami. Thousands of bodies rotting in the tropical heat were tumbled into mass graves."

THE SECOND WAVE

Nancy Shute, in her article "Now the Second Wave" which appeared in *U.S. News & World Report* (January 10, 2005), writes, "Water can kill in more than one way. Even as rescue workers labored to recover the bodies of tens of thousands of people killed by last week's tsunami, public-health officials and international aid organizations were racing to confront the threat of waterborne disease, which could prove to be as deadly as the flood waters themselves. 'Perhaps as many as 5 million people are not able to access what they need for living,' said David Nabarro, head of the World Health Organization's crisis team. 'Either they cannot get water, or their sanitation is inadequate, or they cannot get food.'"

MASSIVE RELIEF EFFORT UNDERWAY

In the January 10, 2005 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, an article appeared under the title "The Aftermath," with the subtitle 'South Asia grieves for the dead and tries to save the living after one of the world's worst natural disasters.' In Bay Fang's article he describes the scene of horror. "It was a wave—it was a monster. It rose from the deep and swallowed life whole in coastal towns across nearly a dozen countries. The seams of the earth moved on December 26, sending up a wall of water that rolled across the Indian Ocean, throwing boats into hotel lobbies, bodies into trees, turning a world upside down. From luxury resorts in

Thailand to fishing villages in Sri Lanka, the death toll rises every day, well above the already unimaginable 120,000 mark. In the end, the full impact of one of the worst natural disasters in history may never be known. A generation of lost children. An estimated 5 million people displaced. And in the detritus of shattered lives, homes, and futures, survivors facing the daunting task of rebuilding it all."

Further, he said, "The most massive relief effort in history is just beginning in this post-apocalyptic environment and will still mean the difference between life and death for many survivors. The United Nations says up to 5 million people now lack access to the bare necessities of life—clean water, food, shelter, sanitation, and health care. The fear of disease is spreading from rotting corpses; and contaminated water makes the speed of delivery that much more crucial. Hospitals have collapsed, and electricity is nonexistent. In many places, rescue workers had to bury, or burn, the growing piles of bodies before they could turn to the needs of the living."

SEEKING ANSWERS

A *Reuters* news article (December 30, 2004) reporting these catastrophic events was entitled: "Faiths Ask of Quake: Why did you do this, God ?" The column was written by Peter Graff of London. He begins by acknowledging, "It is one of the oldest, most profound questions, posed by some of the most learned minds of every faith throughout the course of human history. It was put eloquently this week by an old woman in a devastated village in southern India's Tamil Nadu state. 'Why did you do this to us, God?' she wailed. 'What did we do to upset you?'"

A TEST OF FAITH

Perhaps no event in living memory has confronted so many of the world's foremost and prominent religions with such a basic test of faith as this week's tsunami, which indiscriminately slaughtered Indonesian Muslims, Indian Hindus, Thai and Sri Lankan Buddhists, and tourists who were Christians and Jews. In temples, mosques, churches and synagogues across the globe, clerics are being called upon to explain—How could a benevolent god visit such horror on ordinary people? Religious leaders with diverse faiths have described the destruction as part of God's plan, and proof of his punishing power for human sins. They say that it is an expression of God's disfavor with the world. It is interesting to note the varied lack of understanding among these religious leaders concerning these matters.

Israeli chief rabbi Shlomo Amar told *Reuters*: "The world is being punished for wrongdoing, and its needless hatred of each other, and lack of charity." Pandit Shastri, a priest of New Delhi's huge marble and sandstone Birla Hindu temple said that the disaster was caused by a "huge amount of pent-up man-made evil on earth, and driven by the positions of the planets." Azizan Abdul Razak, a Muslim cleric and vice president of Malaysia's Islamic opposition party, said the disaster was a reminder from God that "he created the world and can destroy the world." Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, a leading British Muslim cleric from Leicester in England was quoted as saying: "We believe that God has ultimate controlling power over his entire creation. We have a responsibility to try and attract God's kindness and mercy and not do anything that would attract his anger."

SOME ASK, IS THIS THE END OF TIME?

Many faiths believe and teach that disasters of this magnitude foretell the time of the end, or perhaps the coming of a Messiah. Many Christians expect chaos and destruction as foretold in the Bible, and especially in its final graphic word Revelation. Some say that these great events are 'signs of the times.' Others are asking whether it is possible for God to do these sorts of things to his human creation. The ultimate question has also arisen as to whether there is a God.

Clergy from various faiths seem unable to give a credible answer for such natural disasters, and other events. These leaders must deal with these sorts of issues on a continuing basis. Not only is this necessary during times of great catastrophe, such as occurred during the recent tsunami, but also for the everyday sorrows of life. Without adequate answers the people continue to remain in the dark.

SCIENTIFIC ANSWERS

Those who put their trust in some sort of a scientific belief system answer that it was simply a natural disaster. The fact that the terrible events that transpired on that fateful day destroyed people of all faiths, suggest that it was not directed by God, and had no particular Divine order. They say that this is not something God has done, and that he has not picked out a certain group of people in a certain area of the world with a particular plan to punish them. They also say that the earth has certain imperfections that have been built into its natural order of things, and that we have to learn to live with them. The issue should not be "Why did God do this to us?"

It is revealing to note, in this connection, the answer that was given to *Reuters* by a Greek Orthodox Theologian, Costes Kyriakides in Cyprus, who said, "I personally don't attach any theological significance to this. I listen to what the scientists say. God is always the fall guy. We incriminate him completely unjustly."

NATURAL DISASTERS COMMON TO MAN

This particular catastrophe, as devastating as it was, is not a new occurrence. It is only one event among many others. Every year countless numbers among the human family are killed by natural disasters of all kinds. Tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and many other calamities have been common to mankind throughout the history of the world. Many others are killed or maimed due to war, accident, pestilence, or famine. Those who have not suffered death in any of these specific ways finally submit to the penalty of death from other so-called natural means such as disease and old age. No one escapes death; all succumb to the dying process that in some cases comes at an early age, while others may hang on until advanced age.

WHY DOES GOD PERMIT CALAMITIES?

This question has been discussed by God-fearing people of all faiths who seek answers to the perplexing matters of life that confront us all. The principles of right and wrong are an integral part of God's laws for his human family. Much of the suffering that comes upon mankind is due to these standards of right and wrong being largely ignored. Although man was endowed with a

conscience, that part of his makeup is not always willing to acknowledge what should be appropriate righteous actions. Furthermore, man's conscience has become seared with the increasing levels of immorality and social acceptance that are being tolerated.

OBEDIENCE REQUIRED

The Bible record indicates that the penalty for disobeying God's laws was death as meted out by the sentence of death proclaimed in the Garden of Eden. "The LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Gen. 2:16,17) Adam and Eve were thus driven out of the garden into the yet unfinished earth to die. That penalty has been inherited by all mankind, and the test of obedience that God had placed upon them.

PEACE, BE STILL

On one occasion during Jesus' earthly ministry, he was on board a ship when a great storm arose. The wind and the waves began to beat upon the ship, and some of his disciples who were with him became very anxious as he lay asleep. "He himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion: and they awake him, and say unto him, Teacher, carest thou not that we perish? And he awoke, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm."—Mark 4:38,39, *American Standard Version*

This text of scripture illustrates the chaotic and stormy sea that will culminate in the destruction of earth's present institutions and social order. The sea upon which Jesus and his disciples were riding symbolically represents the discontented and restless masses of mankind that cry out in despair because of the storm. However, it also gives evidence of the mighty power that our Lord exercised over the natural elements of this world—in that case, the sea.

The unfinished earth to which our first parents Adam and Eve were driven when they left the Garden of Eden, will one day be at rest as a result of the mighty power from above that will be activated by our Lord. At that time he will proclaim 'Peace, be still,' and the wind and the waves will obey his voice. Also, during that time of kingdom blessings, the whole creation will come to appreciate the laws of God, and will be assisted up the highway of holiness as they strive to be obedient.

THE EARTH AT REST

There will no longer be the calamitous events that befall mankind as is true at the present time. We look forward with much anticipation as that wonderful time of kingdom blessings draws nearer. May we continue to pray for that kingdom to soon come. "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful."—Rev. 21:4,5 ■