

# REDEEMER

R E P O R T

FEBRUARY 2005

## GOD AND THE WAVES OF DEATH

BY: TIM KELLER

There have been many voices asking how anyone can believe in a good all-powerful God in the (literal) wake of the terrible Indian Ocean tsunami in December. In *The Guardian*, Marvin Kettle writes: *It is hard to think of any event in modern times that requires a more serious explanation from the forces of religion than this week's earthquake. Voltaire's 18th-century question to Christians - why Lisbon? - ought to generate a whole series of 21st-century equivalents for all the religions of the world.* (December 28, 2004.)

Kettle refers to Voltaire's famous challenge to belief in God after an offshore earthquake and tsunami in 1755 killed 60,000 in Lisbon, Portugal alone. The journalist indicates that while the 9/11 tragedy can at least be partially blamed on human agency, natural disasters

cannot. Kettle concludes: *Europe in the 18th century had the intellectual curiosity and independence to ask and answer such questions. But can we say the same of 21st-century Europe? Or are we too cowed now to even ask if the God can exist that can do such things?* He thinks, obviously, that evil and suffering on this scale constitute a very strong argument against the existence of God. What can we say in response? Three things.

**First**, the problem of evil and suffering is a great problem *only* if God actually exists. If there is no God, we live in a world operating solely on the principle of the 'survival of the fittest' and 'nature red in tooth and claw.' In the secular account of things, it is absolutely *natural* for the stronger to eat the weaker. And as Annie Dillard wrote 'Nature cares not a whit' about the individual being. It is absolutely *nat-*

*ural* that people who live in certain places or behave in certain ways are killed off and don't pass on their genetic code.

Of course, if there is an eternal world, a supernatural realm, and a God, then there could be a standard by which we could evaluate Nature and find it flawed or 'broken.' We could then say 'stronger people *ought not* to trample weaker people' and 'people sleeping in their beds shouldn't suddenly be swept to their deaths by a tidal wave.' But if Nature is all there is, how could we possibly judge it to be un-natural or 'wrong' in some way? As Marilynne Robinson wrote: *"If all that has happened on this planet is the fortuitous colonization of a damp stone by a chemical phenomenon we have called 'life', then...even the universal human predisposition to...[value life]..."*

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## REDEEMER'S ANNUAL VISION SERVICE

**February 16th, 2005 at 7:00PM – St. Bartholomew's (Park Ave.& East 51st St.)**

Once a year we take an evening to look at our vision and update the congregation on how it is unfolding. This special service is a time to come together as a community and hear about what God is doing through Redeemer. There will be a time of praise and worship and Tim Keller will speak. Whether you have been going to Redeemer a long time or just a few weeks, attending this service is the best way to know what is happening in our church and enable you to join in carrying out the vision God has given us for renewing the city. Childcare provided.

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*must be assumed to be a form of adaptation.*" (*The Death of Adam*, p.2-3)

In other words, if all human life is just a random chemical phenomenon developed into complexity by a process of natural selection, then even our strong moral sense that 'this is a tragedy' or 'it's not right to kill innocent people' is an illusion. It is just something that has helped us survive.

It is perfectly fair for secular people to 'tweak the nose' of God-believers in the face of deadly disasters. If there is a God and a supernatural realm then there *is* such a thing as evil, and the natural question is—why doesn't God stop it? But evil and suffering can't be an argument against the very existence of God, because if this natural world is all there is then concepts of good and evil, justice and injustice are all matters of opinion and ultimately just "a form of adaptation."

**Second**, the problem of evil and suffering must be understood by Christians against the backdrop of what the Bible says about the "Fall." Voltaire's "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" assumes the existence of the early Enlightenment's 'deist' God, who created the world and set it up to operate just as it is now. That is not the Christian God at all. The Eastern Orthodox theologian David Hart writes in *The Wall Street Journal*: "*The Christian understanding of evil has always been more radical...we exist in the long melancholy aftermath of a primordial catastrophe, this is a broken*

*and wounded world, and...when the incarnate God enters the world at once his own and yet hostile to him, his appearance within this cosmos is both an act of judgment and a rescue of the beauties of creation from the torments of human nature. Whatever one makes of this story, it is no bland cosmic optimism.*" (Dec 31, 2004)

This is a crucial point. Objections to God's existence like those posed by Marvin Kettle and Voltaire create something of a 'straw God'(!) who made the world as it is. But St. Paul says that all of nature groans in agony and decay and longs for the day when God's glory will heal and restore it (Romans 8.) If there is no God, death is totally natural. Indeed, terrible disasters do not actually increase the amount of death in the world (since everyone dies!), they just concentrate it for us to see. But the God of the Bible hates suffering, evil, and death more than we do. It is part of the ruin of his creation that he is bound and determined to restore and heal.

That leads to the **third** point. The thoughtful reader will say, "But this does *not* get the Christian God off the hook. If he is all-powerful, why does he allow evil and suffering to go on? Why doesn't he stop it, and stop it now?" But as Peter Kreeft says, Christianity is the only religion that shows us a God who not only doesn't try to get 'off the hook' of suffering, but puts *himself* on the hook of human suffering. Only Christianity claims that God became uniquely and fully human in Jesus Christ and therefore knows first hand despair, rejection, loneli-

ness, poverty, torture, imprisonment.

And we are told on the cross he went beyond even the worst of human suffering and experienced infinite, cosmic rejection and suffering that exceeded ours as infinitely as his knowledge and power exceeds ours. Why did he do it? The Bible says this is the rescue mission for the creation. He had to pay for our sins so someday he can end evil and suffering without ending us. And if this is true then we actually do have some help in the intellectual problem of 'why suffering?' We still have no answer to the question— "why doesn't he end it now?" But while Christians don't know why God lets evil continue, they know it can't be that he does so out of indifference or detachment. God takes our misery and suffering *so* seriously that he was willing to get involved with it himself.

We have several accounts of storms in which his disciples feared for their lives—but Jesus calmed the waves of death. When Jonah was cast into the deeps, he said, "*You have hurled me into the deep...All your waves and breakers have swept over me, I have been banished from your sight.*" (Jonah 2:3-4) But Jesus said he was the ultimate Jonah (Matt 12:41.) Some day he will calm all storms and oceans and heal all the brokenness of the world, but only because he himself went under the ultimate waves of death and received the ultimate banishment. Because he did that we can trust him until that day.

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## REDEEMER REPORT

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HUNTER COLLEGE AUDITORIUM  
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West 64TH and CPW  
service at 9:15AM

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH  
Corner of West 79TH and Broadway  
service at 7:00PM

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# WHAT I LEARNED IN SCHOOL TODAY

AN INTERVIEW WITH TAWANNA BROWN BY JOHN LIN

The School of Gospel Foundations is continuing to add to its class offerings. In addition to classes that have been offered on the East and West Sides after our morning services, we've begun experimenting with classes after our evening services. The purpose of our classes is to develop and grow our community here at Redeemer through the process of learning together. Here's an interview with a Redeemer attender, Tawanna Brown.

## **How did you come to New York and Redeemer?**

During the time that I was in college in Miami, I had been praying to God about a change in my life. I asked the Lord about New York and about a change in career. A year later, He answered my prayer! My next question was whether there were any Christians in New York. I had never thought of New York as a "religious" place. I went on the Internet and searched for "Christians in New York" and Redeemer's web site was one of the hits. The rest is history!

## **Please describe your experience in our School of Gospel Foundations**

After I moved here, I read about the classes offered by the School of Gospel Foundations in the Sunday program and then looked

on the Redeemer web site for more information. I was so excited! I must have emailed John Lin about five times through the summer about when classes would start and what topics would be offered. When September rolled around, I ended up taking a class on Old Testament Survey taught by John. It was amazing! The class was packed to capacity every week, and often overflowed into the hallway! People were sitting on the floor, on the windowsill, in the doorway! Everyone asked questions, took notes, and received answers as we studied the Old Testament together. It gave such clarity to a topic that can be so daunting. If our questions weren't answered, we would email John during the week and he made sure to address them in the next class.

Since then each class I have taken has been a tremendous help to my Christian growth. My beliefs have been challenged and my desire is to know more about God and how to live for him. Taking these classes has helped me in that quest. From Katherine Leary's Faith and Work classes to Tom Jennings' class on worship, I have grown tremendously. They have helped me to understand what I believe.

## **How has taking part in our School of Gospel Foundations expanded your experience of community at Redeemer?**

Taking these classes has reminded me that I am not alone. As I have met people in class, I see them as real people and not just faces in the Sunday crowd. In class I am reminded that I am not the only person with a question or a problem and that someone else may have the same questions and problems as me! The School of Gospel Foundations has given me another opportunity to experience real community at Redeemer and for that, I am grateful.

Classes are being offered after each of our services in five class "cycles." Teachers range from professional educators to businesspeople, pastors to lawyers. Classes cover topics from Old Testament to Vocational Decision Making, Worship to Prayer. Additionally, from time to time special lectures are offered along with our normal classes. For more information on upcoming classes this spring, check out our website at [www.redeemer.com](http://www.redeemer.com). Come join us!

## A THANK YOU FROM THE DIACONATE

### **Please accept our sincere thanks for your contributions to the annual Mercy Fund Offering on December 12, 2004.**

The funds provided through the offering enable us to meet the needs of men and women in the Redeemer congregation who are experiencing crises of various kinds. We are very grateful for your generosity and consider you to be partners with us as we care for members of our immediate community.

If you were unable to give at the time of the offering, donations are accepted throughout the year and may be mailed to the Diaconate [at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 1359 Broadway, 4<sup>th</sup> floor, NYC, NY 10018] or placed in the offering basket. Please earmark your check for the Diaconate or place cash in a Diaconate Mercy Fund envelope, which can be found at the information tables at all services.

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## HELPED THROUGH THE DIACONATE HELP LINE

### A DIACONATE TESTIMONY

About seven months ago, I found myself in the midst of an overwhelming crisis. Family tragedy and a sudden job loss, followed by unexpected housing loss and personal illness left me completely unable to support myself. Some days, I didn't even have enough money for food. I was ashamed and embarrassed about my situation.

Although I have been a Christian since I was a child, and God has given me great assurance of my relationship with Him throughout my life, when this crisis arose, I lost sight of God's grace and mercy for me. I found myself giving in to wrong and prideful thinking that said, "If I were a 'better Christian' I could fix all this." I was overwhelmed and distraught. In retrospect, I can see that being in such dire need forced me to ask for help. Friends in my Redeemer Fellowship Group referred me to the Diaconate Help Line, and what a wonderful surprise I found when I contacted them!

I met with an absolutely wonderful deaconess who listened intently to my most personal feel-

ings, thoughts and problems. She helped me take a realistic look at the problems I was facing. Together, we created a plan of action to help me get out of my immediate crisis and begin to seek healing in areas of my life that had been broken for many years. The Diaconate provided me with financial support to help pay for rent, food, medical insurance and Christian counseling. My deaconess also prayed with me regularly, encouraged me with Scripture, kept me accountable, and offered me wise Biblical counsel.

Getting help from the Diaconate showed me that I was not trusting the Lord completely with the deep sorrows of my soul. I was holding onto part of my heart to fix myself because I thought that I was responsible for that brokenness and wasn't sure if God could really handle it.

My experience with the Diaconate helped me get beyond those fears and expanded my ability to trust other people and God. The Christ-like love my deaconess showed me made the truth of God's

promise in Isaiah 42:3 come alive for me. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."

*They loved and accepted me when I did not and could not accept myself. They forgave my shortcomings and failings when I could not. They comforted me when the suffering was too great to bear. They helped me take care of myself when I was unable to do so. They taught me how to care for myself, and I can now do the same for others.*

God clearly used the body of Christ to help me beyond what I could have asked or imagined! I learned that my circumstances and struggles are *not* who I am in Christ. I have eternal significance based on Christ's death and his atoning work on the Cross. I now feel *hope* in many areas of my life where it never existed before...hidden and dark places. I am so glad that I did not run away from the Diaconate's help... Redeemer's help...God's help.