

NATURE'S NASTY NATURE?

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As I put pen to paper today, the news services are replete with stories reflecting the one year anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami. Associated Press (AP) writer Chris Brummitt recounts, "a magnitude-9 earthquake ripped apart the ocean floor off Indonesia's coast and sent 30-foot-high waves crashing onto shores." WBIR (an NBC affiliate) confirmed that 216,000 souls perished in the December 26, 2004 disaster that ravaged twelve countries from Malaysia to East Africa. CNN Headline News reported the death toll would top 230,000 should those still considered missing be declared dead. CNN covered several memorial services and reported that the area still experiences small quakes 2-3 times a week. Out of the 1.8 million people displaced by the disaster, 80 percent still live in tents, plywood barracks or the homes of family and friends according to the aid group Oxfam International. Despite \$13 million in donations world-wide—75 percent of which have already been secured—the area still has not fully recovered.

Just a year before the Indian Ocean tsunami, an earthquake in Bam, Iran killed more than 30,000 people. *USA Today* reported that on March 28, 2005, an 8.7 magnitude quake again shook Sumatra and killed another 647 people, most on the island of Nias. On October 8, 2005, a 7.6 quake caused 80,000 more deaths in Pakistan.

Anyone who regularly watches the evening news or reads the newspapers knows that earthquakes of varying degrees have become a staple of our news digest. In their November-December 2005 issue, *The Good News* magazine reported that geological activity in the new Madrid fault zone had caused considerable concern for the United States. The fault runs from southern Illinois to northeastern Arkansas and includes the St. Louis and Memphis areas.

"Major quakes occurred in that area during the early 1800's, at one point even causing the Mississippi River to flow backwards for a time. Officials stated that 'a repeat today would cause wide spread loss of life and billions of dollars in property damage'" (*The Good News* magazine p.15, citing *USA Today*).



In this satellite photo Hurricane Katrina covers much of the Gulf of Mexico. Katrina was the most expensive natural disaster in U.S. history and killed over 1,200 people.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

My dad had a collection of Bill Cosby records that I loved to listen to as a child. A bit from one of Mr. Cosby's monologues always comes to mind when the subject of earthquakes is mentioned. Paraphrasing Mr. Cosby, he said, "You can say that you don't believe in a Higher Power. You can call yourself an atheist and say you don't believe there is a God. But I'm telling you right now, when that ground shakes, you're going to look up!" There are several of us looking up now.

THE TEMPEST

Those who are awaiting the coming Kingdom of God look to the Bible to understand the signs of the times. In order to fully grasp the depth of Scripture it is often beneficial to examine the text in its original language. Most English translations have much to say about future earthquakes (i.e., Matthew 24:7; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11; Revelation 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18). The Greek word translated "earthquake(s)" in each of these prophecies is "seismos." However, this same Greek word can also be translated "tempest," as in Matthew 8:24, "And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves. . ." *Strong's Lexicon* defines *seismos* as "a commotion, i.e., (of the air) a gale, (of the ground) an earthquake—earthquake, tempest" (Strong's No. 4578).

Hurricane Katrina was the most costly natural disaster Americans have ever experienced, and it

occurred only eight months after the Indian Ocean tsunami. In the human toll 1,200 lives were lost. Katrina caused an estimated \$200 billion in damage, not counting the economic hit from losses to shipping, oil and gas production, fishing and agriculture.

Science magazine, in its September 16, 2005 issue, reported on research by scientists at the National Center for Atmospheric Research. They concluded that while the number of hurricanes and cyclones had not increased, there has been "a sharp increase during the past 35 years in the number of category 4 and 5 tropical cyclones, the most intense storms that cause most of the damage on landfall" (Richard Kerr, "Is Katrina a Harbinger of Still More Powerful Hurricanes?", p. 1807). Specifically, the most dangerous storms—those rated category 4 and 5—have increased by 80 percent from the 1970's to the last decade.

Last year so many violent storms occurred that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) ran out of names and had to resort to using characters from the Greek alphabet. Now, one month after hurricane season officially ended, "Zeta" is forming in the Atlantic Ocean. Zeta is the 6th letter in the Greek alphabet and the 27th-named storm of 2005.

Even the secular media cannot help but draw parallels between Biblical pronouncements and modern headlines. On my desk is a drawing by Jonathan Brown, a cartoonist for the *Desert Morning News*, which

depicts a weatherman in thigh-high water holding a microphone. In the dialog box he says, "As bizarre weather continues across the world, we can expect more floods, earthquakes, disease, pestilence, fire, brimstone. . . your garden variety Wrath of God in Biblical Proportions." Ironically, he penned this cartoon in early 2005, long before hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma ever came about. At that time parts of California and the Northeast were experiencing unprecedented flooding, while central California and the Midwest battled wildfires. At the time of this writing the Midwest is again on fire and parts of California are under water. Seventy-three wildfires swept across 30,000 acres in Texas and Oklahoma as a result of that region's worst drought in fifty years (AP). California, our country's most liberal state, is experiencing wide-spread flooding and mud slides as another new storm front settles in.

Even Biblical history shows similarities with the degenerating morals of today's society. The debased state of man before the global deluge (Genesis 6), or more pointedly, the account of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) should serve as sobering indications as to the direction we are headed. The Indian Ocean tsunami wiped out the portion of the Thai coast infamous for its child-sex trade. Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans just five days before 100,000 invited gays and lesbians were to gather there for their annual "Southern Decadence" festival.

Is a loving God beginning to force humanity to consider its ways, beliefs and practices, or were these just random acts of nature out of control? If God is indeed trying to get our attention, are we listening? The Mississippi barge casinos are already being rebuilt inland, and Bourbon Street is open for business. New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin (D) recently lifted the ban on 24-hour-a-day liquor sales just weeks after informing still homeless citizens that funds were being set aside for the 2006 Mardi Gras celebration.

America can recover from these "natural" disasters, from 9/11 and (hopefully) from the war on terror. Nevertheless, if these are just "the beginning of sorrows" (Matthew 24:8), then what will God have to do to really get our attention? I hope that we are all prepared to find out. ■