

**SLIDE 1**

Let us Pray:

Heavenly Father,

We worship Jesus Christ, your only Son, our Lord, whom you sent to us, and for us, because you loved us.

O Lamb of God,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood  
you ransomed people for God  
from *every* tribe and language and  
people and nation.”

O Holy Spirit,

We pray that you would guide and direct all of our proceedings tonight, as we acknowledge your ongoing work in the midst of the people of the nation and language of Japan, from the home islands to the ends of the earth.

Amen

Good evening!

What I'm about to share this evening is not, of course, an expository sermon but, rather, a report of sorts, as well as some spiritual reflections on a particular current event. But I'd like to begin, nonetheless, with a passage of Scripture that I *hope* will serve to guide and inform us in those reflections.

The passage I have in mind is from the eighth chapter of Romans, beginning from verse eighteen.

Paul writes:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We *know* that the *whole* creation has been **groaning** as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

*The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

—Rom. 8:18-22 (NIV)

I must confess that it's with no small degree of trepidation that I've accepted the invitation to share with you tonight. Unlike most audiences I've addressed in the past several months, I doubt if there's a single person among you who is any less connected than I am to the tragedy that unfolded in Northern Japan this year, on March eleventh; nor, for that matter, is it likely that any of you here this evening have been any less diligent than I've been about keeping up with the stories and the news related to the *tsunami* and to all of the subsequent relief and recovery work that has been carried out in Jesus' name ever since.

I know for a fact that a number of you were actually *in* Japan at the time of the earthquake and, if I'm not much mistaken, there are even one or two of you who were **in** or **near** the disaster zone itself when it happened. . . and if that's you, there's nothing I can say today that will do justice to what you felt and experienced.

## **SLIDE 2**

Where were *you* when you heard the news about 3/11. Here in Canada, my wife, Yuko, and I were a little late in realizing what was going on that morning of March 11<sup>th</sup>. Yuko was sick in bed so I took our children to breakfast at the dining hall of the theological College where I'm on staff. As we were eating, a student from Hong Kong, who knew that we are from the Tohoku region, asked me if I had heard about the earthquake in Sendai—he said that over a *thousand* people had died. That didn't sound very likely. I assumed that he was getting his facts mixed up. But I was curious, so when we got back to the apartment I went online to check the news and, of course, you know what kind of images and YouTube videos greeted my eyes . . . as they did yours. It took several minutes for me to register that I was witnessing the worst thing to ever happen to Japan in my lifetime, and that the fishing town that I grew up in, and where my parents still live, was under a red tsunami alert.

There's no time to share my personal anecdotes here about how I woke Yuko up, how we realized that that was the day her parents were supposed to be travelling to her father's home town in Iwate, or how we spent the day crying and praying and trying to contact family members. But I imagine that it was much the same in your homes as well, for many of you. And I'm sure that each of us began asking ourselves that day some variation on the question: WHY? Why?

And, of course, that question, in *all* of its variations, is what lies behind the topic I've been asked to address tonight:

**“The Spiritual Impact of the Tsunami.”**

There was a book written by a Greek Orthodox theologian shortly after the 2004 tsunami, in the Indian Ocean. It was called *The Doors of the Sea*, and the subtitle was: “Where Was God in the Tsunami.” In his book he writes:

Considering the scope of the catastrophe, and of the agonies and sorrows it had visited on so many, we should probably have all remained silent for a while. The claim to discern some greater meaning—or, for that matter, meaninglessness—behind the contingencies of history and nature is both cruel and presumptuous at such times. Pious platitudes and words of comfort seem not only futile and banal, but almost blasphemous; metaphysical disputes come perilously close to mocking the dead. There are moments, simply said, when we probably ought not to speak. But of course we *must* speak.

Indeed, we must, and my sense . . . is that most of us here probably share a fairly **robust** theology of the sovereignty of God. And I *hope* that most of us sharing this evening together are *confident* in our faith that God is GOOD, that not even a single sparrow falls to the ground without **Him** caring deeply about it, and that what He is accomplishing in and through history is good and right.

And so we desperately want to know, not so much where God *was* in the tsunami, but what good things of eternal value we might be able to identify emerging from its aftermath. We want to know what the spiritual impact of the *tsunami* has been on a nation where only one in two hundred people profess to believe in the Son of God. We want to know if God is in some way using this occasion to bring about a spiritual awakening.

Needless to say, the story of what God is doing in post-3/11 Japan is too big for any one person to apprehend. And it goes without saying that many—if not all—of you are considerably more qualified to tackle this question than I am. So the most I can dare to offer in the next few minutes are a few pieces of the big picture that—I *hope*—will serve to enrich your own mosaic of what this *tsunami* has meant in the context of contemporary Christian mission in Japan.

### **SLIDE 3**

To better arrange these pieces in a coherent order, I would like to draw on a letter sent out recently by Brian Stiller, who is probably best known here in Toronto for his longtime role as the president of Tyndale, and who is now a Global Ambassador for The World Evangelical Alliance. He entitled this letter “Punching above their weight,” and it consists of his reflections following a visit to the Tohoku region this month, eight months after the *tsunami*.

He writes [*this text has been edited by the speaker*]:

Travelling the north east coast of Japan, walking the devastated areas washed into rubble by a mighty tsunami is overwhelming. Physically, the trauma caused by the earthquake and 50 foot high waves is incalculable. 20,000 deaths. Areas now contaminated by radiation that will be unused for thousands of years. Land

sunken by the weight of the sea, is vulnerable to flooding with each tide. People from the area of the Fukushima nuclear reactor are treated as lepers. Products sold from that area are treated with suspicion, understandably vegetables, but steel bearings? People – live – *in fear*.

....

In the middle of these sad and hopeless communities, Christians have set about to do what most would never have believed they could do. They were considered too small to do much.

Christians have done what was not expected of them. In the hours after March 11 a small Christian relief organization called CRASH sprang into action. In the wildness of those early days, as people and money and resources poured in, nothing would happen unless it was coordinated. Samaritans Purse brought in a military 747 jumbo jet loaded with supplies, but unless distributed to those in need it would sit in warehouses.

Aided by the Japan Evangelical Alliance, CRASH brought together people from all streams of Christian life. Seasoned missionaries dropped what they were doing and joined. Young people arrived from around the world, over 1700 of them. Many Japanese Christians set aside their work and moved into the five relief camps set up in the disaster zone.

Seven months later . . . . Tens of thousands of people remain in resettlement camps. Machines continue to clean up the carnage. Life is trying to get back to normal. But this is Japan. A world in which family and community are everything. Now, brutally separated by death, many are lonely and completely unprepared to face a winter without friends and family.

CRASH, as a coordinator of churches and resources, has moved into a new phase, providing emotional aftercare. While the machines do their work, Christians are now giving focus to the soft underbelly of human trauma, people living alone without hope. Here the potential suicide rate (already high in Japan) could spike this year if people are not reached in time.

A pastor told me of a Japanese person of another religion who said, “I’ve watched you Christians. When people from other religions arrived, they worked to clean up their temples and help their people, but you Christians help anyone. You didn’t just stick with your own. And I’ve noticed that, now that most of the others have left, you Christians are still living and working among us.”

Japan, one of the most difficult countries of the world in opening to the Gospel, is a curious mixture of intensely focused family and community lifestyle and a high regard for ancestors. As well the various phases in which Christianity was introduced has left most, if not disinterested, wary of the Christian message.

....

What we can see, and give thanks to God for, is that within these past seven months, the Christian community has given powerful witness of love and care for those in need. The consequence of that witness will be visible in the coming years. Some soil has been prepared. May the seeds now find hospitable ground and, with careful nurture, we pray for a harvest, assured by the Father.

We'll stop there, for now, and I'd like to draw your attention back to the conclusion of the first paragraph in Dr. Stiller's letter.

#### **SLIDE 4**

“People - live - in *fear*.”

It was to be expected, and the eyewitness accounts of relief workers from the outside confirm, that the intense emotional and psychological trauma resulting from the death and destruction caused by the tsunami has indeed had an intense spiritual impact on the local people—and, for many, the most dominant expression of that intense spiritual impact is a deep and debilitating *fear*.

For example, the gas station attendant who told my father that when he heard the tsunami warning he thought he'd at least have time to finish up a few things before evacuating. Then he heard the loud, metallic sound like a backhoe clanging against rocky soil. "That's what it sounded like- the power poles being snapped off. That's when I knew I was in trouble. I jumped into my 4-wheel drive car and headed out. The wave actually caught me and lifted the car for a minute, but I got away. *I have nightmares about it every night.*"

Or, for example, the elderly woman who lives across the street from Ofunato Baptist Church, who clung to the top of her dressing cabinet for hours in order to keep her head above the freezing, filthy black water that flooded her home.

She once said to one of our OMF missionaries: “I wish I could get my floors replaced in here. And my walls. They pulled the floors up and cleaned out underneath, but they only finished this one little room. In the room I sleep in, they threw the old plywood back down and we put a carpet over it. It still smells like the tsunami. You know that smell? Like the black, rotting mud from the harbour bottom? I go to sleep for about an hour, then I wake up in a panic with that smell in my nose. I go on like that until about 3:00 a.m., then I just give up and listen to the radio or watch TV. Then I sit around here all day half asleep. Every time there's an aftershock, or even a loud noise, I get goose bumps.”

These are only two minor examples of the deep fear that now seems to be gripping a majority of the population along the coasts of the Tohoku region. The tsunami burst their first-world protective bubble. It shattered their materialistic illusion of security. It brought death *out* of the hospitals and *out* of the old folks homes, and brought it *into* the public streets, *into* their

workplaces, and into their *own* homes.

One of the results of this, that our pastors and missionaries report, is an intensification of religious sensitivity. People in this region are becoming more religious. They're increasing their religious performances at temples and shrines.

They're praying more. Some of them are making homemade, cardboard *butsudans* to replace the ones that were destroyed in the tsunami. Many cults, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, have been very active.

### **SLIDE 5**

I recently read a story about a young, foreign volunteer's conversations with a fifth grade girl named Rio-chan . . . in Kamaishi City. “. . . Her mother was still missing from the tsunami. She didn't reunite with her father until days after the disaster, and her grandparents didn't survive. Rio's father eventually found her all alone at an evacuation centre, but *before* he found her, she'd gone to the make-shift morgue and searched through the dead bodies for a familiar face. When the volunteer asked Rio if there was anything she could do for her, Rio asked for an *omamori*—a protective charm amulet. She wanted *something* - with *spiritual* power - that she could hold in her hand to feel safe.

### **SLIDE 6**

But have people been coming to Christ? There's a strong current running through the evangelical community that wants to say: “This is it! God's going to use this tsunami to bring Japan to Christ!” and we need to be careful about that.

There have been many, far worse natural disasters in Japan—at least in terms of the number of human deaths—that have not resulted in people turning to Christ and the Christian faith. To insist, without any evidence, that this *particular* tsunami and this *particular* death toll will have a *particular* spiritual impact on Japan shows a lack of historical perspective. At best, it will open us to criticism for being naive. At worst, it can even bring the sincerity and good will of our labour of love in the disaster zone into question.

We should be careful, at least at this time, of believing exaggerated claims about the impact that the gospel is having among tsunami victims. I think of the words of one missionary I read in a newsletter. He wrote, “*I believe the tsunami was sent by God to wake Japan up and we have yet to see that happen—at least in Sendai—there hasn't been the turning to the Lord for which we have prayed.*” This observation is consistent with the big picture that is emerging out of reports from pastors and missionaries. There is no evidence of a spiritual revival taking place, either in Japan as a whole, or locally in the disaster zone.

But this doesn't mean that we're not seeing great advances of God's Kingdom taking place.

### **SLIDE 7** [Christians Mobilized]

The same missionary I just quoted above goes on to say: “*But God has done something else: He has polished up the Church so that she shines brighter. So even though the tsunami was a great catastrophe the result may still be a great blessing . . . which is exactly what we*

would expect from a God who is both sovereign and good.”

And that's *also* consistent with the big picture we see emerging.

As Brian Stiller implied in his letter, in the midst of this year's disaster Christians in Japan have made a tremendous impact and have earned a prominence far out of proportion with their numbers . . . they are so few, and they have done so much. Many churches have started to cooperate, across denominational and geographical lines, not just in the stiff and formal ways we sometimes had in the past but zealously and generously. And achieving this kind of unity is huge in the history of Christianity in Japan.

It's true that we haven't seen large numbers of non-Christians come to faith in Christ, not yet, but we've seen large numbers of Christians come to a *truer* faith in Christ. For many of them, as one report has it, “their moment to bear witness has come. We've seen many believers become more convinced of the truth of gospel, more willing to work hard and cooperate, feel more responsible for the salvation of their neighbours and family, be less materialistic, more prayerful and more aggressive in evangelism. And there is much evidence to indicate that this spiritual refreshing has been repeated in *many* evangelical churches throughout Japan.”

Christians in Japan have mobilized, massively. There has been denominational relief work done by the Catholic, Anglican, and United Churches.

The evangelical churches have been famously represented by the Christian relief organization called CRASH, which stands for Christian Relief, Assistance, Support, Hope. In the eight months since the earthquake and tsunami they've opened up five base camps and carried out relief work in 16 additional towns and cities. They've accepted and deployed over one thousand eight hundred volunteer workers. They've spent over 150 million yen—that's a little over 2 million Canadian dollars—on relief work ranging from clean up and reconstruction to emotional care and children's programs.

So far, Christians, both in Japan and around the world, have contributed donations in excess of four-and-a-half million Canadian dollars to CRASH for carrying on that work well into the future—and, yes, the work that they're doing *will* continue to be necessary, *well* into the future.

## **SLIDE 8**

Not only have Christian churches in Japan been awakened into a high level of spiritual energy, but the worldwide church has been awakened into a heightened awareness of the spiritual needs of Japan. In May of this year, international donations from secular sources were far below expectations. Only 705 million dollars had been given towards tsunami relief in Japan, in spite of the 300 billion dollars in damages that it had caused. This was in comparison to 2.8 billion dollars donated by secular sources in 2010 in response to floods in Pakistan which had caused 10 billion dollars in damages; and to 4.6 billion dollars contributed in that same year in response to the Haiti earthquake which had caused about 14 billion dollars worth of damage. Even Hurricane Katrina in the United States elicited 3.4 billion dollars in secular

donations, in spite of the fact that the cost of damages was less than one third that of the tsunami in Japan.

But *Christians* around the world have not only responded in a massive outpouring of prayer but also with a generosity of financial, material and human resources. Even here, in this building, we witnessed a joint prayer meeting of Chinese and Japanese churches which raised over \$20,000 for OMF's Sendai Earthquake Relief Fund. I'm happy to report that, as of a month ago, OMF's two-and-a-half million dollar target has been reached, and we're now directing all new donations to CRASH, which has a much larger infrastructure and, therefore, a much greater capacity to deploy funds.

### **SLIDE 9**

And people *have* noticed this generosity of self-giving. Relationships are being formed. Bridges are being built between the tiny community of Japanese Christians and the rest of Japan. We've already mentioned the man from Dr. Stiller's letter who said: "I've watched you Christians. When people from other religions arrived, they worked to clean up their temples and help their people, but you Christians help anyone. You didn't just stick with your own. And I've noticed that, now that most of the others have left, you Christians are still living and working among us."

Here's another story, told by a volunteer:

The handwritten note on the front door said, "March 20. We're all safe." Inside, the giant tsunami had almost reached the ceiling of the living room as it swept away family treasures and brought in tons of black, slimy sludge. Today I and nine other volunteers are shovelling out muck alongside the owner of this house in Tona, near Sendai. First we tear off the mud-smearred floorboards and scoop out the 50 cm high seawater with plastic buckets. Even though we wear towels over our hair, goggles, masks, gloves, boots, and raincoats, we still get covered from head to toe with the stinky sludge.

The owner, who is staying in an apartment nearby with his wife and daughter, asks, "Are you all Christians?" I answer, "Yes, we are." His next statement moves my heart: "There are many religions out there in this world, but Christians always come first and help."

### **SLIDE 10 [mobile cafe]**

There's still an awful lot of cleaning up that needs to be done, but we're now in the recovery phase and the focus has shifted to meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of survivors. CRASH and other Christian groups are working to integrate survivor care into all aspects of their relief programs.

This takes such forms as 1) community service teams assisting communities with their felt needs in recovering from the disaster, 2) week-long programs teaching children how to deal with traumatic situations, 3) emotional care through giving hand massages and listening to people process their experiences, 4) and literature pointing people to a God of hope, a God who cares. One of the most well publicized ministries has been the outdoor and mobile cafes.

In fact, CRASH has produced a short video on them which I'd like to show you.

**SLIDE 11** [mobile cafe video]

**SLIDE 12**

Another unique way of meeting real needs and building bridges was hit upon by my father last spring when he noticed elementary school children trying to do their homework on the hard wooden floors of the school gymnasiums that were serving as temporary emergency shelters. Since he loves wood working, he started making little study desk sets. The demand has been enormous and he's now diversified into benches, porches, bunk beds . . . pretty much anything people ask him for. He not only has volunteers helping him, but he has also taught junior high students as well as groups of residents in the temporary housing camps how to make these simple furniture sets.

What has the spiritual impact of the tsunami been. *We don't know.* We've indeed seen God at work in the aftermath of the tsunami, especially within the Church. But the spiritual forces that oppose the gospel in Japan are fierce. We see them in operation right now, and we need intensely spiritual Christians to face them. As Dr. Stiller says, "some soil has been prepared," and I'd like to close by reading the rest of his letter.

Some soil has been prepared. May the seeds now find hospitable ground and, with careful nurture, we pray for a harvest, assured by the Father. But there are three requests: continue to pray. This is an issue needing the power of the Spirit to break the strongholds that keep Christ from being known. Second, send your best young people, and if possible for more than 30 days, preferably 30 years: to build into the culture, language and people, to bring a new paradigm of church growth and help in renewing the people. Third, continue to invest. Yes the currency makes it expensive. Yes the work has been slow. But if I know one thing about people of faith, when the going is tough, we hang in there, giving and praying all the more.

**SLIDE 13** [OMF video]