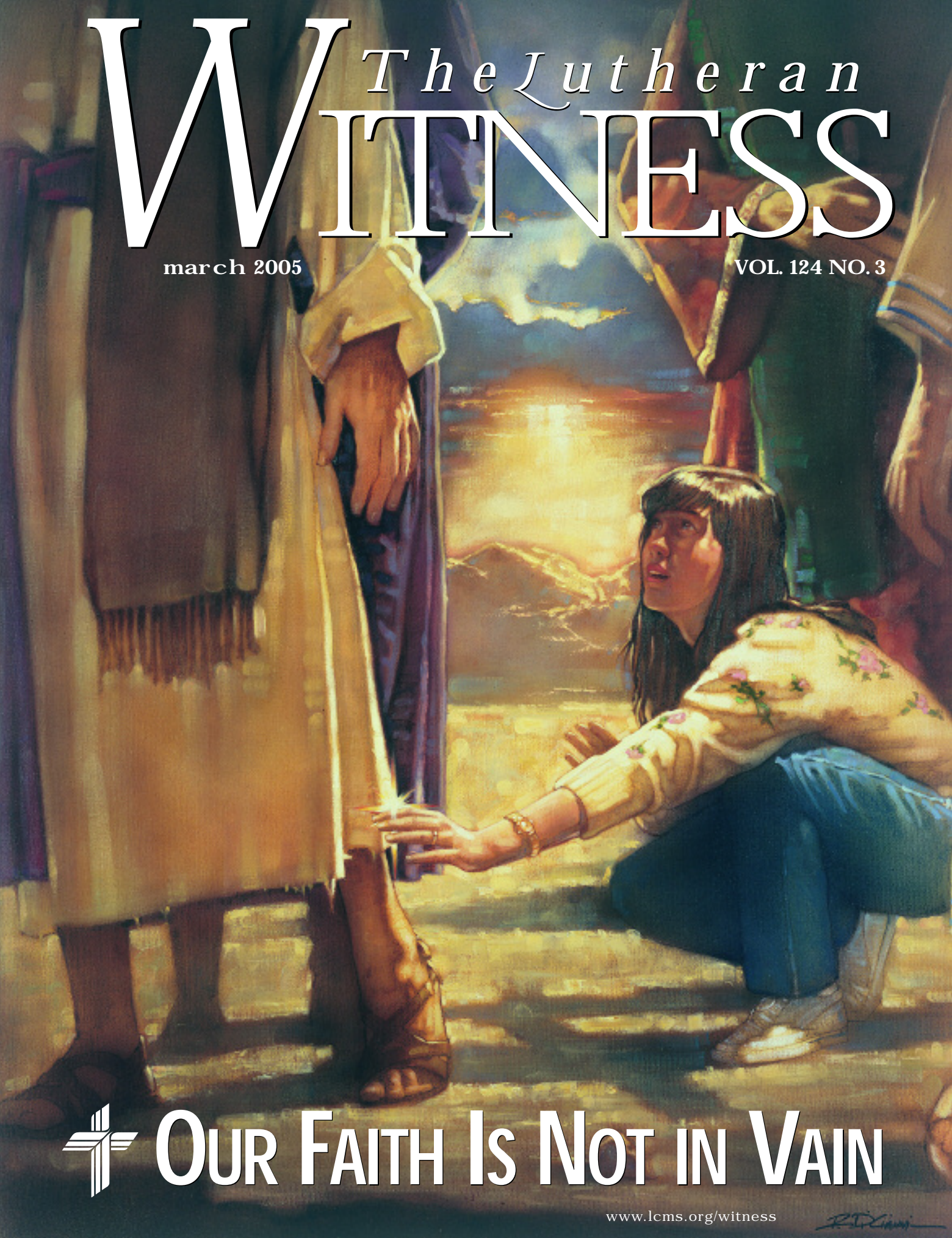


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## OUR FAITH IS NOT IN VAIN

# CHRIST AND THE TSUNAMI

by Matthew Harrison

I stood staring at miles of devastation beyond comprehension—beyond anything I’ve ever contemplated, much less beheld with my own eyes. The twisted wreckage of the passenger train “The Queen of the Sea” carried the stench of a thousand lives lost.

Why?

I had not known before of Pastor Ranjith Fernando, but I do now. When I visited Sri Lanka in January, I had to see the wreckage of the train in which he was traveling when the tsunami waves struck.

The first wave stalled the train. Hundreds made their way to the roofs of the rail cars to wait it out, only to have a second wave nearly 40 feet high hurl the train into a suburban neighborhood, leaving rail cars on rooftops. A thousand drowned, among them Ranjith, who had just translated the Lutheran Confessions into Sinhalese, and his wife.

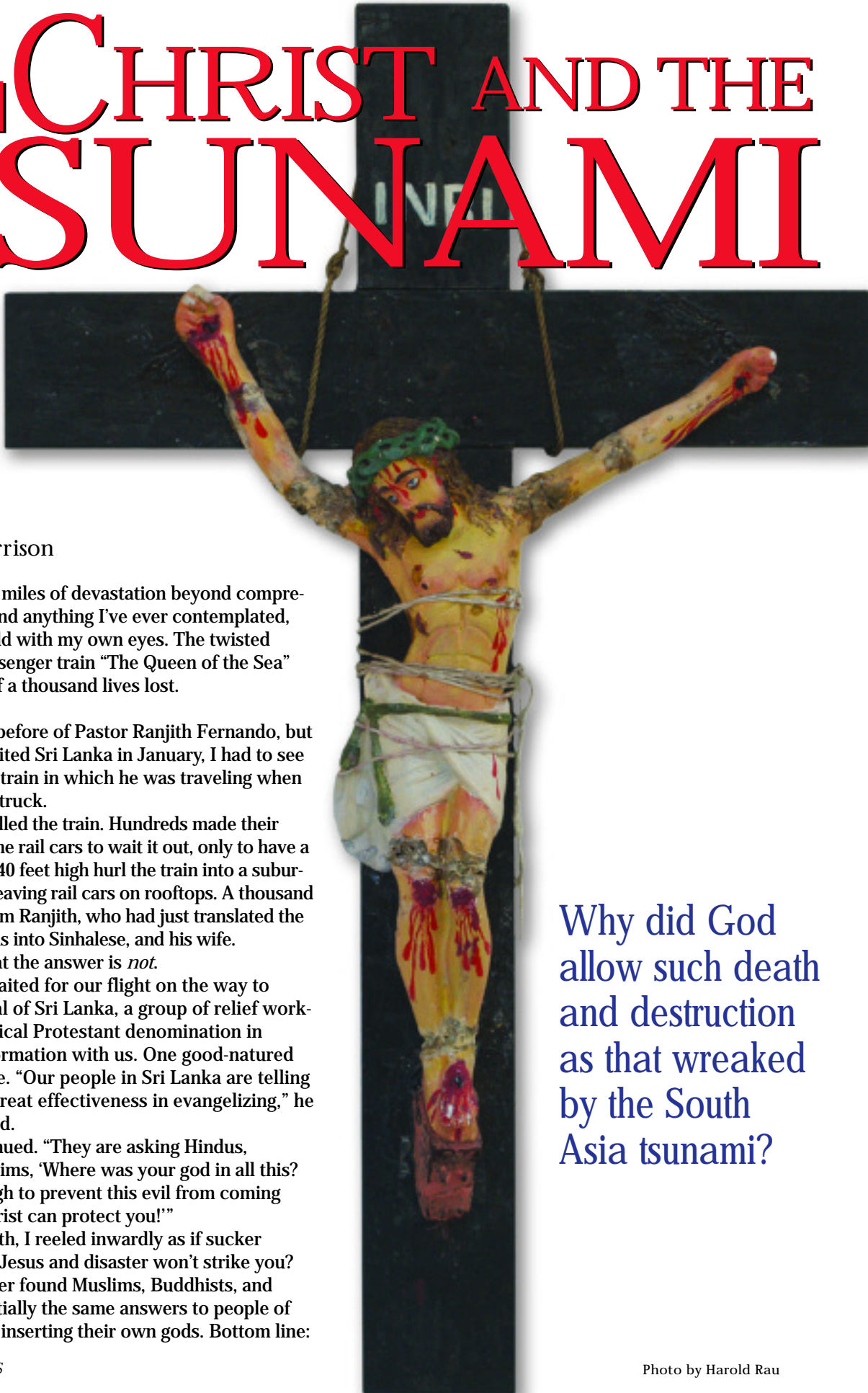
Why? I know what the answer is *not*.

In Paris, as we waited for our flight on the way to Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, a group of relief workers from an evangelical Protestant denomination in America traded information with us. One good-natured man pulled me aside. “Our people in Sri Lanka are telling us they are having great effectiveness in evangelizing,” he said. I was interested.

“Yes ...,” he continued. “They are asking Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, ‘Where was your god in all this? Was he strong enough to prevent this evil from coming upon you? Jesus Christ can protect you!’”

Thinking of Ranjith, I reeled inwardly as if sucker punched. Believe in Jesus and disaster won’t strike you? How ironic that I later found Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus giving essentially the same answers to people of other faiths—albeit inserting their own gods. Bottom line:

Why did God allow such death and destruction as that wreaked by the South Asia tsunami?



This tsunami struck you; God struck you, because you had things wrong religiously.

I would rather confess with Martin Luther and the New Testament: "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."

Would a benevolent God do this? Would an all-powerful God allow this? Is God then good? Is God then actually in control of the world He created? Is there a God? The only answers God gives us are in Christ and His cross.

Mark's gospel bears this out in a remarkable way:

At Jesus' baptism, the Father says from heaven, "My beloved Son. ..." Jesus is the Son of God. After that, no one in the gospel (aside from the demons!) gets Jesus right! Jesus healed the paralytic only to have the religious officials scoff, "Why does this man speak like that? Blasphemy!" The demons were sent out of a man and into pigs only to have the locals plead, "Go away!" Jesus was rejected by the people of Nazareth, "a prophet without honor in his own hometown."

Even the disciples didn't get it. Peter did seem to get it for a moment—"But thou art the Christ ..."—but when Jesus told them that being Christ meant going to the cross, Peter said, "No!" Then came Jesus' strongest rebuke: "Get behind me Satan." Jesus kept telling them that He would die, then rise in three days, but "they did not understand."

Then Holy Week. It began as the crowd sang His praise with palm fronds, symbols of Palestinian liberation. They got Jesus wrong, too. The high priest asked Jesus, "Are you the son of the blessed?" When Jesus answered, the priest tore his robe—"Blasphemy!" The crowd wanted His blood. "Crucify!" The soldiers mocked, "Hail, king of the Jews!" The passersby wagged their tongues, "Save yourself!" "Those who were crucified with him also reviled him."

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus prayed Psalm 22 as valedictory, and they got that wrong, too. "Behold, he's calling Elijah." They *all* got Jesus wrong ... all except one man: "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'" (Mark 15:39).

Only when face to face with Christ hanging dead on the cross, does someone finally get it right. The Son of God came to suffer and to die for us. Though risen, He



W. Nehal Gamini, a Sri Lankan fisherman whose village was devastated by the tsunami, gives Rev. Matthew Harrison a crucifix that had been in his house. Today, the still-battered but somewhat repaired crucifix (left) hangs at the International Center of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in Kirkwood, Mo.

ever remains the "crucified one" (1 Corinthians 1).

What does that mean for a tsunami? I don't finally know the mind of God. But I do know from the cross that God works His most profound deeds in suffering. And so I plunge my feeble mind into the suffering of Christ and know that amidst trials and crosses and disaster upon disaster, God *loves us* in Christ. And there, only there, I find consolation amidst the devastation. In faith, I know that resurrection follows Good Friday.

The women stood at a distance and watched Him die. Hopeless. The end. "God hates this Jesus ... and us," they may well have thought. Or perhaps even, "There is no God, or certainly no God who cares about us."

Yet right there, on Good Friday, God the Father was doing what He had prepared to do from all eternity for the salvation of the world. The most loving act of God in history was veiled and hidden by a bloody, wretched cross.

Where was God in this tsunami? Where He always is—in Christ, in suffering, in the cross.

Why did God allow it? I don't know. There is no Elijah or Jeremiah to tell us exactly. "In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son." I do know that in Christ, "God so loved the world. ..." And I do know that this tsunami is driving us—and many, many Asians—to the foot of the cross, to confess, "Truly, this man is the Son of God."

Now it's time to work and bind up those for whom Christ died.



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