

Week 2: Rock Me Like a Hurricane – Natural Evil

Introduction

For thousands of years people have tried to come to terms with the horrible things that the world seems to throw at us. Last December a rift between two plates that make up the earth's crust shift suddenly and dramatically off the coast of Indonesia. The shift sent out a shock wave through the ocean that ultimately lifted millions of tons of water up out of the ocean and onto unsuspecting villages in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand, and as far away as Africa. Tens of thousands of people were drowned in a matter of minutes. Let me ask you a question – was this a good thing? See, once again we've established something that far too many people take for granted. You decided that something was "evil," and not "good."

Q: What made the disaster "evil"?

A: People died. But what makes death so bad? What if only old people had died, near the end of their natural life anyway? Would it still have been a terrible disaster?

Tonight we're going to talk specifically about natural evil, the evil that we usually don't attribute to any human person or agency. While it is most certainly true that there is always some human responsibility in any natural disaster (who chose to build two cities with a combined population of 16 million people – Los Angeles and San Francisco - on top of active fault lines?) we're not going to talk about that tonight. What we will talk about is what makes natural evil *evil*, and if there is a god ¹, what kind of god would permit natural evil to occur? Does natural evil serve any purpose, if any?

Is Natural Evil Real?

You know by now that the best way of getting at an issue is to ask a stupid question so we can get to some good answers. Stupid questions like, "Was the tsunami all that bad?" Some of you pointed out that the tsunami WAS bad because it resulted in people dying, and in creating the conditions where many more would and will die. We then asked why death itself was so bad, and there we came to something really close to the truth. Death and evil go together, like love and marriage or a horse and carriage. If we say something is evil, it probably involves someone dying.

All evil revolves around death. There is nothing that we would call "wrong" that doesn't somehow involve death. Stealing takes away a person's possessions, which are for better or for worse part of their life. Murder is just the ultimate theft – the taking of someone's most precious possession, their life. Adultery kills a relationship between two people. As things get closer and closer to real taking of life, the more evil they tend to get.

¹ I have chosen to type god with a small "g" when referring to "some kind of supreme deity," and God with a capital "G" when referring to the Triune God of the Christian faith. This is because the word "god" does not necessarily mean the Christian God, but can mean any kind of supreme being. This should help us to remember that just because someone believes in god doesn't mean they're a Christian.

When I was in school, I studied the exploits of Arsene Lupin, thief extraordinaire. He was the hero, not the villain, of his books, even though he was a thief. We can occasionally turn thieves into heroes, as long as they don't *kill* anyone. But I don't know of any mass murderers who have been turned into heroes. No one cheers for the murderer, no matter how suave he is. The only way to turn a murderer into a hero is to put him up against another murderer, like the Alien vs. Predator or the Freddy vs. Jason horror movies. So if there is such a thing as natural *evil*, it's because there are things that happen that no one seems responsible for, that kill people.

Theodicy

When it comes to religions, there are really only three kinds in the world. The first religion is *atheism*, which confesses that evil exists but there is no god. The second is *pantheism*, which affirms that there is a god who is everywhere, but that evil is just an illusion. The last is *theism*. Theists believe there is a god, and that there is also evil. As we learned last week, Christianity is a kind of theism, but not all theists are Christians. If you are the kind of theist who believes god is evil, you have no problem explaining why there's evil in the world. Your particular problem is explaining why there's any good in the world! If you're a Christian theist, and you believe that God is good, you are left with the reverse problem: how do we make sense of natural evil? The problem comes from three beliefs held by theists who believe that god is good that seem to contradict each other:

1. god is good
2. god is all-powerful
3. There is evil in the world

In other words, if god is good, and is all powerful, why does he let tsunamis and earthquakes, things that cause death, happen? Indeed, why does he allow any kind of death at all? This is the kind of argument atheists will make against theists who believe god is good. This kind of argument will eventually lead to problems when we talk about moral evil next week. If the atheists are right, and there is no god to stop natural evil, then there's no god to decide what is personally right and wrong either. But I'm getting ahead of myself. The theological study of how to resolve these conflicting beliefs is the study of *theodicy*. In short, why do bad things happen in a world where god is good?

What is Evil?

The first question we have to ask is this: what is evil? It's a slippery thing to define, when you think about it. You know it when you see it – but what IS it, actually?

I've already thrown out what I believe is a basic answer – EVIL IS THAT WHICH IS OPPOSED TO LIFE. Whatever is opposed to life is evil. Let's reflect on this for a minute. Life is a *thing* – you can measure it and classify it. There's even a biological definition for life:

Any entity which exhibits, at least once during its existence: 1) growth, 2) metabolism (the ability to consume, transform and store energy or mass), 3) motion (internal or external), 4) reproduction, and 5) response to stimuli.

That is a horrendously broad definition, I know. But that's because I'm a Lutheran. Lutherans see evil all over the place. That's one of the aspects of the definition that I like. It's hard to separate it or isolate it, which is absolutely true of evil in the world. It permeates everything, so that what we see is the peaks or concentrations of evil, but really it's a kind of background noise present everywhere.

It also means that evil is no thing. It's not a substance, really. It's everywhere, but at the same time it's nowhere. Evil is the places where life is restricted, limited, and hemmed-in. Evil is poverty, famine, bad weather, earthquakes, and disease. The things that cause all those evils are things, it's true. But the earth moving is not in and of itself *evil*. A virus or a bacterium is not *evil*. A tornado is not *evil*. What makes them evil is when they cut into and do away with life.

For those of you who are Christians, and are wondering how this understanding of evil fits with the Bible, I'll point out a few quotes.

- First of all, consider Genesis 1 and 2. Creation and life are there at the very beginning of the world, and considered by God to be good. What is not present at creation is death, or anything that opposes life.
- Second, consider what it is that stands in the middle of the Garden of Paradise, from which the man and woman could freely eat: the Tree of Life.
- What was it, then, that resulted from the man and woman's disobedience to God? Death – a curse upon the ground, so that it would not easily produce life-sustaining food, a curse upon childbirth, so that pain now accompanies new life, and the ultimate death of the man and woman and all living creatures.
- Jesus, in turn, promises that he has come so that we might “have life, and have it abundantly,” (John 10:10) as we did in the beginning.

Where Did Evil Come From?

Looking at those bible passages, we've already started to address the next question we have to ask: where did evil come from? From whence did this opposition to life arise? If god is good, it could not have come directly from god. That would make god the author of both good AND evil, which would mean god was no longer truly good. First of all, evil is not really a thing in and of itself, but rather opposition to a thing. It's like rust on a car, or rot in a tree. Therefore we can say the following:

1. God created all things
2. Evil is not a thing but opposition to a thing, namely life
3. Therefore God did not “create” evil

But where did evil, this opposition to life, come from? Augustine and Thomas Aquinas puzzled this one over, and came up with a logical argument that seemed to describe the situation in a way faithful to the Scriptures:

1. God is absolutely perfect
2. God created only perfect creatures
3. These perfect creatures had free choice.
4. The human creatures, and some heavenly creatures, chose to do oppose life.
5. Therefore, perfect creatures, but not God, caused evil.

On Good Friday, we often hear three verses sung by the pastor called “The Reproaches.” They reflect the problem of evil from the Lord’s perspective. In the last of the Lutheran reproaches, we hear:

Thus says the Lord: What have I done to you, O My people, and wherein have I offended You? Answer Me. What more could I have done for My vineyard that I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? My people, is this how you thank your God? O My people.

So we’ve established two things. First, we’ve established that evil is the opposition to life, and therefore not a thing but an opposition or lack of a thing – the abundance of life. Second, we’ve established that evil was not directly caused by god but rather arose out of the free will of perfect creatures created by God. Now we’re ready to get back to what we really wanted to talk about tonight – natural evil.

Natural Evil Arises from General Sin

If it is true that evil is the opposition to life, and that the chief cause of evil is the free will decision of our first parents to oppose God and the life he had created, then the true source of all natural evil in the world is – us. Earthquakes, famines, disease, tornadoes, hurricanes, all of it, arise out the free will decision to rebel against God.

This does NOT mean there is a one-to-one correlation of any one group of people’s evil deeds with some specific natural disaster. The web of evil in the world is too tightly interconnected for such inferences to be possible. We can’t say “southeast Asia was hit by a tsunami because they are more evil people than people in America.” We can’t say “the community of those who practice homosexuality has been hit by AIDS because what they are doing is evil.”

Jesus himself reinforced this point. When he was confronted with the deaths of several Jews in the Temple, killed by Pilate’s guards, he said the following (Luke 13:1-5):

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed

them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

All natural disasters serve now as markers of the evil in the world, as alarm clocks shaking us out of spiritual slumber, to recognizing the state we're in. Christ came into the world to defeat evil, and the chief evil of the world, death. He came to show that on the other side of suffering can lay an eternal life in a world free from the consequences of free choices that lead to evil.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would say this. Evil is not a thing, it is the lack of the good that is life, the full life that God intended for the whole universe. Evil arose of the free will choices given to perfect creatures. One of the consequences of those choices is what we call "natural evil," the opposition to life that even nature seems to have. In the end, however, we Christ's promise that those who become one with him will conquer this evil and be part a true "New World Order" in the universe to come.

Bibliography

Chamberlain, Paul. *Can We Be Good Without God?* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 1996)

Geisler, Norman L. *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (BakerBooks: Grand Rapids, MI, 1999)

Russell, Burton. *The Prince of Darkness*. (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1988)