

Apologetics | Week 12

Natural Evil

- **Recall last week's arguments against God.**
 - As he took issue with God's existence, William Rowe used a trilemma to stress his point
 - There exists instances of intense suffering in which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
 - An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some equally bad or worse.
 - There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient wholly good being.
 - However, by expressing his argument in this form, Rowe shifted the determination of what was good away from the creator and placed it on the creation.
 - What Rowe calls unredeemed suffering is now to be determined by man and not God.
 - But without a moralistic view, nature itself appears inherently brutal, to which Tim Keller offered this explanation in "The Reason for God", "If violence is totally natural why would it be wrong for strong humans to trample weak ones? There is no basis for moral obligation unless we argue the nature is in some part unnatural".
 - Therein lies the issue, how do we explain the suffering we experience in the physical world around us without God?

- **Keeping this in mind, we will look at the first half of natural evil in the form of Ecological Evil.**
 - When we look at suffering caused by natural events like earthquakes, it is a stretch to label them as evil.
 - In Jeremy Evans book, “The Problem of Evil”, he writes that to declare natural events as evil they would have to be depicted as “...intrusions on the way the world ought to function: and by “world” I am referring to the physical structure of earth and the balance of nature contained therein.”
 - What he is saying is that our view of what is normal may not be correct in observing how nature works.
 - As the knowledge of science and the environment increases, so does our understanding of natural events.
 - This is not to say suffering will not occur due to natural processes, as it most certainly will.
 - However, attributing it to pointlessness, as Rowe would assert, is found to be without merit in many cases.
 - Looking at the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that killed 18,000 in Chennai, India and 230,00 in the full region we can attribute man made failure in advance warning of population centers, etc.
 - But the ultimate cause was a 9.1 magnitude earthquake 31 miles below the ocean surface.
 - Plate tectonic research shows that the fluid nature of the earth’s core and the movement that causes earthquakes and volcanoes is vital to our planet’s ability to sustain life.
 - Shannon Hill, wrote the following in scientific American: “Scientists think plate tectonics, which acts as a global thermostat, might have been our savior by creating volcanoes that spewed carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, helping it retain more heat. Then, as the

sun grew brighter and hotter, rainfall scrubbed the carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and plate tectonics later subducted it into the earth's mantle..., locking it away."

- Similar to plate tectonics, Julia Whitty wrote an article for *Mother Jones* showing how tropical cyclones help maintain global heat balance by moving hot air away from the equator and toward the poles.
- This along with other benefits like replenishing salt marshes and restoring barrier islands show us what is perceived as meaningless or harmful actually has a healing effect on nature itself, and our understanding of it is limited.
- God's reach extends past simply functional use however. In Gerald Sittser's book, "A Grace Disguised" he deals with what he calls the terror of randomness. In the loss he experienced he says he came to understand God's working once his perspective changed by saying, "The Joseph story helps us see that our own tragedies can be a very bad chapter in a very good book. The terror of randomness is enveloped by the mysterious purposes of God. In the end, life turns out to be good, although the journey to get there may be circuitous and difficult."
- As the desire for knowledge grew exponentially in and after the enlightenment period each subsequent generation has felt it had attained all that needed to be known.
- It seems though that the further we see the more we find there is to see.
- The secular world has determined that knowledge is the supreme goal in life and things that can't be understood are to be dismissed as unimportant. This fits what Paul wrote in Romans 1:22 when he said "professing to be wise, they became fools."

- **The second half of this subject of natural suffering is labeled as Biological Evil.**
 - While satan used disease to directly attack Job, not all infirmity can be attributed to him or other demons.
 - How then are we to find meaning in how a good God can allow things like cancer, infant mortality and other infirmity to infect His creation?
 - When we isolate this subject to itself for discussion, it seems everyone eliminates the certainty that man is finite.
 - It becomes assumed that if God would intervene and eliminate disease man would not die, which we know to be false.
 - In the book “Tuesdays with Morrie”, Morrie Schwartz, who was suffering through ALS, said “Everyone knows they are going to die. The problem is nobody believes it.”
 - Personal suffering is exactly that, personal; and it causes a person to be more introspective and seek reason for the pain they are experiencing.
 - So what should we determine as the expectation of a person for a full life? What is the appropriate time and what is an acceptable cause for how a life should end?
 - Is man “owed” a life free of uncaused (the term uncaused used here to differentiate disease as compared with human inflicted pain) suffering until some type of death from an accepted natural cause?
 - We find in these questions the argument is more about time than cause bringing us to the old saying “everyone says they would be satisfied to live to 80, but at 79 wants to renegotiate their contract.”
 - So we come back to the fundamental question that applies to both ecological and biological evil/suffering; does it serve any purpose that God can use for good?

- In the book “Why Suffering” a conversation is held with a woman whose daughter has a disease that blocks her pain receptors. She relates that every night she prays “God, please let my daughter be able to feel pain!”
 - Here we see that pain can be a protector to alert us to further harm.
 - C. S. Lewis in his book “The Problem of Pain” highlights this when he says, “It is in light of such experiences (i.e. painful ones) that we must consider the goodness of God. Beyond all doubt, His idea of goodness differs from ours.”
 - In His goodness God not only took on suffering in His life in Christ, He walks with us to encourage, strengthen and provide for us as we walk.
 - This is expressed more fully in passages like Psalm 23 and Romans 5:3-4 where Paul wrote “More than that we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”
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- **The Problem of Man**
 - When we consider natural suffering we should also look at the role of man within it, as the fall of man and the effect of sin cannot be excluded from what is viewed as purely natural.
 - In both ecological and biological suffering the greed and selfishness of man has increased the natural suffering inflicted on humanity.
 - We began our discussion with the secular argument that natural suffering is unabated and has no answer.
 - Scripture and observation of the world speaks otherwise, however.
 - In God’s response to Job He says, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”

- Psalm 104:19 speaks to order when he writes “He made the moon for the seasons; the sun knows the place of its setting.”
 - We understand disruption precisely because of the predictability of the natural order around us. The recent eclipse was extraordinary because of how many days are filled with consistent unblocked light from the sun.
- Suffering and bodily infirmity is distressing precisely because of the general good health of the people that are around us.
 - Many gospel accounts deal with Jesus healing the sick.
 - Health conditions in the 1st century Palestine were much different than what we experience. Joseph Zias, wrote in *Biblical Archeologist*, that he estimated over 50% of the population was dealing with lice. Other diseases (skin disorders and mimicking afflictions) were found in a high percentage of remains, pointing that up to 75% of the people were dealing with some type of infirmity.
 - Today affliction seems more acute to us because God has allowed us to treat so much (20,000 people in Fairhope and 180 beads at Thomas).
 - Then, like now, people wanted relief from circumstances which. Jesus sometimes supplied.
 - However, it is important to note that God uses our afflictions for His glory and our best, eternal redemption.
 - In Mark chapter 2 Jesus heals the paralytic, but first He noted his internal soul crushing affliction and forgave his sins. The outward affliction was used to bring attention to and heal the inner.
- We can also see environmental issues being raised on purposeful, detrimental effects of man (pollution, habitat

destruction, etc.) on a creation we were commanded to cultivate and care for in Genesis 2:15

- These man-made impacts impede the ecological and biological arena as seen in the cholera outbreak on Haiti in 2004 due to negligence of people sent to protect and care for the Haitian people.
 - It is also a culture stripped of natural resources by self-serving dictators at the expense of an entire nation.
 - In his book “Mountains beyond Mountains” Tracy Kidder saw all the hunger and physical suffering and noticed how many of the Haitians held hope through religion.
 - He asked them how a just God could allow such misery among them and they answered with “Bondye konn bay, men li pa konn separe”. It translates as “God knows how to give, man does not know how to share.”
 - The book of James brings this out clearly in 3:16 by saying “for where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.”
 - Man looks at God as the causal agent and himself as savior, when all through scripture it is fallen man that cause destruction and God that is the redeemer.
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- **God’s Answer**
 - What then is the Christian response to all this that we see around us in the natural world? Giving an explanation for why suffering would occur in the world stops short of offering a response to the pain of an individual suffering personally. The response is to show grace as each person uses pain to allow themselves to look inwardly.
 - Steve Saint, whose father was killed by the Waodani tribe in Ecuador expressed this about God’s overarching purpose:

- “I have personally paid a high price for what happened on Palm Beach. But I have also had a front row seat as the rest of the story has seen unfolding for half a century. I have seen firsthand that much good has come from it. I believe only God could have fashioned such an incredible story from such a tragic event. I could not begin to record the thousands of people who have told me that God has used what happened on Palm Beach to change the course of their lives for good.”
- The effects of natural evil are real and cannot be dismissed as occurring apart from God. Neither can we try to simply rationalize the pain of others with trite responses. We must meet grief on a personal level as expressed by Nik Ripken, “During our time of grieving, we learned an important spiritual lesson: before we can grasp the full meaning of the Resurrection, we first have to witness or experience crucifixion.”
- The answer to the suffering of people around us is not found in us, but outside us in Jesus Christ. Tim Keller sums this up in “The Reason for God” by stating, “...how can God be a God of love if He does not become personally involved in suffering the same violence, oppression, grief, weakness and pain that we experience? The answer to that question is twofold. First, God can’t. Second, only one major world religion even claims that God does.”