

Theism and the Problem of Natural Disasters

Intro: We live in world of natural catastrophes. Almost every day scenes of pain and devastation are brought into our living rooms, the result of tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes. More recently all of us have become vividly aware of the power of nature to destroy. A tsunami kills over 150,000 in SE Asia; landslides in California kill several people; Hurricanes in the gulf ravage tens of thousands of homes and take hundreds of lives.

In the aftermath of the tsunami, many people were confounded by the very occurrence of such horrifying events in the providence of God. They ask questions like “Why does God allow such things?” Why does He not intervene and stop such things?” One southeast-Asian woman wrote:

... Many lost their homes and children died on that day... It only brings tears and heartbreaks when we know our creator just stands by the side, allowing this tragedy to happen. I just wish HE would intervene and this world would have less suffering and pain. Why would a loving God allow this to happen?

Others use such events as proof that a benevolent God does not exist, contending that the God of Scripture could not exist in view of the suffering in the world. How does the person of faith deal with these questions and difficulties?

God’s role in the world’s suffering

God is sovereign ruler of the universe and of the earth we live in.

Rabbi Harold Kushner argued that God is powerless to stop such things in the natural world. He can only stand helplessly by when such things occur and weep for our misfortune.

Perhaps we would do well to listen to the likes of Rabbi Harold Kushner, who contends that God is not really as powerful as we have claimed. Nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures does it say that God is omnipotent. Kushner points out that omnipotence is a Greek philosophical concept, but it is not in his Bible. Instead, the Hebrew Bible contends that God is mighty. That means that God is a greater force in the universe than all the other forces combined.

Personally I have trouble with idea that a God who infused the world with its power is powerless to prevent that power when it is destructive. On what basis can we explain the miraculous work of God which often suspended the forces of this universe for God’s purposes?

The Bible affirms God’s rule over man and natural forces.

Who can read Job 38-39 and not acknowledge God’s sovereign control over all the forces of the natural world?

The world that exists today exists as it does by the will of God.

When I say this I don’t mean that the world exists the way God wanted it to be. I do mean that no condition of life can exist unless God wills that it exists.

To say that God is Sovereign does not make Him the immediate cause of all natural disaster.

God is often credited as the active agent in all catastrophes. Insurance policies refer to catastrophes in nature as “acts of God”.

The Bible affirms that God has at times been the immediate cause of a natural disaster.

Cf. the Egyptian plagues

The Bible affirms that Satan has at times been the immediate cause of natural disaster.

Cf. Job 1:18-19

Interestingly on this occasion, the evil that fell upon Job’s family was described as “fire from God” (Job 1:16).

But whether from God or Satan, God is still sovereign and all natural disasters must at last come under His control, if not attributable to His active will, then attributable to His permissive will.

Natural disasters have a place in God’s will to serve His purposes.

It is clear that the natural disasters I have cited served a clear purpose, i.e. they were not random meaningless events. And if I acknowledge this truth, then I am forced to seek out answers to the question, “What purpose would such disasters have in the providential will of God?”

Natural disasters may be a necessary part of the earth’s composition for life.

Hurricanes and tornadoes are simply the extreme product of the same forces that water our soil. The landslides in California the product of the gravitational forces of earth that make life possible.

Even earthquakes may be rooted in basic principles of the earth’s creation. An interesting quote:

Virtually all forms of “natural evil” are actually examples of necessary design. For example, earthquakes and volcanoes are absolutely necessary for the existence of advanced life forms.

Without tectonic activity (which produces both earthquakes and volcanoes) land masses would have never formed on earth and our planet would have been a waterworld (which the Bible says it was when God created it). With no land masses, human life is impossible. So, God, in His wisdom, has designed the earth to build land masses through earthquakes and volcanoes so that He can relate to creatures more advanced than fish. - R.

D

Natural disasters may be a part of the curse placed upon the earth because of man’s sin.

Gen. 3 reveals a curse upon the animal kingdom, man and woman, and the earth. Man needed to learn the lesson that sin brings pain and suffering.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation

groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. (Romans 8:20-22)

Natural disasters may be harbingers of “the day of the Lord” (a time of judgment and deliverance).

Such events are a constant reminder not only of the consequences of sin but also of the anticipated deliverance of God’s people.

“For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. “But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. (Matthew 24:7-8)

Natural disasters are a permanent part of this world as a means to achieve the fear of God.

I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. (Ecclesiastes 3:14)

They remind us of the uncertainty of earth life.

They remind us of the certainty of death.

They remind us of our powerlessness.

They may call men to repentance as acts of judgment on sinful men.

They may serve to suppress worldly motives and replace them with spiritual ones.

Thus, they should remind us of the need to fear God. The question that we all must answer is, “Would we be different had the world not possessed such features?”

Natural disasters provide the occasion for display of sympathy, compassion and love.

The indiscriminate suffering of this world calls forth the need for loving our fellowman.

The Palestinian famine produced the occasion for the gifts of the Gentile churches to their needy brethren in Jerusalem (Ac. 11:27-29).

Natural disasters anticipate and prepare us for God’s deliverance and a world where “there is no curse”.

And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bond-servants shall serve Him; (Revelation 22:3)

This world is imperfect; but there is a perfect world to come.

And so it is possible to offer some logical explanation for suffering in this world. But somehow I imagine that all my reasoning about suffering would mean little to someone who has seen all that he possesses vanish away.

Those who believe must learn to trust God when we can’t explain the reason for His actions.

Who among us has not experienced the bewildered and confused look of a child who cannot “understand” why we are doing to him what may cause him pain? The pain of the needle prick may be the necessary thing to save his life. The pain of a surgery may remove a life-threatening mass in the

body. What we hope that they will learn from our actions over time that we love them and want the best for them, even when we did something that they could not at the time understand. So God may also have to allow suffering for man's greater and ultimate good, hoping that we will learn that He has always loved us and sought our salvation.

In this sense, no "apology" or "explanation" need be made for God.

Instead we must embrace Him in the heart based on what we know about Him.

We know that He loves the creation He made.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. (1 Peter 5:6-7)

And we know that His heart is broken not only by man's sin but by the severe consequences that become necessary to bring men back to their senses and to the reality of sin.

For the Lord will not reject forever, for if He causes grief, then He will have compassion according to His abundant lovingkindness. For He does not afflict willingly, or grieve the sons of men. (Lamentations 3:31-33)

We know that He entered our world and experience all our pain, even that of the evil of man to man.

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. (Hebrews 2:10)

We know that He plans for us a perfect world, restoring us to what we were meant to be.

and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4)

Living with mystery in some areas does not mean that we cannot fully embrace what is knowable! No matter what occurs in life we must be able to say "God is great! God is good! I will love and serve Him regardless of what occurs in this world of fallen men."

Conclusion: What then shall we say? That suffering is needed in this world of sin and serves its purpose in the redemptive plans of God. But God is not indifferent to our pain. He has done the most remarkable thing. He has entered our suffering:

John Stott wrote: "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross...In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face,

detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness.

That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering. "The cross of Christ...is God's only self-justification in such a world as ours.