

God, 9/11, the Tsunami, and the New Problem of Evil

By

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Introduction

In the new heaven and new earth, according to Revelation 21, there will be no more sea. Many people feel disappointed by this.

The sea is a perennial delight, at least for those who don't have to make a living on it. What is going on? The sea is part of the original creation, part of the world of which God says that it is "very good." But already by the story of Noah the flood poses a threat to the creation, with Noah and his floating zoo rescued by God's grace. From within the good creation itself come forces of chaos, harnessed to enact God's judgment. We then find Moses and the Israelites standing in front of the sea, chased by the Egyptians and at their wits' end. God makes a way through the sea to rescue his people, and again to judge the pagan world; like the Noah story, though now in a new mode. As later poets look back on this decisive moment in the story of God's people, they celebrate it in terms of the old creation myths themselves: the waters saw YHWH and were afraid, and they went backwards. But then, in a passage of enormous influence on early Christianity, we find in the vision of Daniel 7 that the monsters who make war upon the people of the saints of the most high come up out of the sea. The sea has become the dark, fearsome, threatening place from which evil emerges, threatening God's people like a giant tidal wave threatening those who live near the coast. For the people of ancient Israel, who were not for the most part seafarers, the sea came to represent evil and chaos, the dark powers that might do to God's people what the flood had done to the whole world, unless God rescues them as he rescued Noah. This sets the biblical context for any reflection on what happened on December 26 last year.

It may be, indeed, that one of the reasons we love the sea is because, like watching a horror movie, we can observe its power and relentless energy from a safe distance, or, if we go sailing or swimming on it, we can use its energy without being engulfed by it. I suspect there are plenty of Ph.D. theses already written on what's going on psychologically when we do this, and I haven't read them. We would, of course, find our delight turning quickly to horror if, as we stood watching the waves roll in, a tsunami were suddenly to appear and come crashing down on us, just as our thrill at watching a gangster movie would turn to screaming panic if a couple of thugs, armed to the teeth, came out of the screen and threatened us personally as we sat innocently in the cinema. The sea and the movie, seen from a safe distance, can be a way of saying to ourselves that, yes, evil may well exist; there may be chaos out there somewhere; but at least, thank goodness, we are all right, we are not immediately threatened by it. And perhaps this is also saying that, yes, evil may well exist inside ourselves as well: there may be

forces of evil and chaos deep inside us of which we are at best only subliminally aware; but they are in control, the sea wall will hold, the cops will get the gangsters in the end.

Of course, in the movies of the last decade or two things may not work out so well, which may tell us something about how we now perceive evil both in the world and in ourselves. And, of course, when a real tsunami wipes out quarter of a million people in a day, we are forced to take stock of everything in a new way. We are forced, in fact, to think in fresh ways about the problem of evil; maybe even to see that there is what I have called in tonight's title "a new problem of evil."

What do I mean by this? In the last few years, everyone has been talking about evil. President Bush has declared that there is an "axis of evil" out there somewhere, and that we have to find the evil people and stop them doing any more evil. Tony Blair said three years ago, ambitiously, that the aim of his government must be nothing short of ridding the world of evil. The press shout "evil" at the faces of terrorists and child-murderers. And the odd thing about this new concentration on evil is that it seems to have taken many people, not least politicians and the media, by surprise. Of course they would say that there has always been evil; but it seems to have come home to the Western world in a new way. The older discussions of evil tended to be more abstract, with so-called natural evil (represented by the tidal wave) and so-called moral evil (represented by the gangsters). But the tsunami and the gangsters came out of the theory books and attacked. Just as in the previous generation Auschwitz posed the problem in a new way, September 11, 2001, kick-started a fresh wave of discussion about what evil is, where it comes from, how to understand it, what it does to your worldview whether you're a Christian or an atheist or anything else, and, not least, what if anything can be done about it. And, though terrorism and tsunamis are not the same kind of thing, the events of December 26, 2004, have added their own dimension to the problem.

From the Christian point of view, there will be, in that sense, no more sea in the new heavens and new earth. We are committed, within the worldview generated by the gospel of Jesus, to affirming that evil will finally be conquered, will be done away. But understanding why it's still there as it is, and how God has dealt with it and will deal with it, how the cross of Jesus has anything to do with that, and how it affects us here and now, and what we can do here and now to be part of God's victory over evil — all these are deep and dark mysteries which the sudden flurry of new interest in evil open up as questions. What I want to do this evening is not to attempt to answer the problems but at least to sketch out the areas where we should be urgently thinking and praying.

1. The Inadequate Old View of Evil

The older ways of talking about evil tended to pose the puzzle as a metaphysical or theological conundrum. If there is a god, and if he is a good, wise and supremely powerful god, why is there such a thing as evil? Even if you're an atheist, you face the problem: Is this world a sick joke, which contains some things that make us think it's a wonderful place, and other things which make us think it's an awful place, or what? You could of course call this the problem of good, rather than the problem of evil: If the world is the chance assembly of accidental phenomena, why is there so much that we want to praise and celebrate? Why is there beauty, love, and laughter?

The problem of evil in its present metaphysical form has been around for at least two and a half centuries. The Lisbon earthquake on All Saints' Day 1755 shattered the easy

optimism, the straightforward natural theology, of the previous generation. The wrestlings of the great enlightenment thinkers — Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel — can be understood as ways of coping with evil. And when we come further forward to Marx and Nietzsche, and to the 20-century thinkers, not least Jewish thinkers, who have wrestled with the question of meaning following the Holocaust, we find a continuous thread of philosophical attempts to say what has to be said about the world as a whole and about evil within it.

Unfortunately the line of thought which has emerged from this at a popular level is least satisfactory. I refer to the doctrine of progress. Everything is moving towards a better, fuller, more perfect end; if there has to be suffering on the way, so be it; omelets are made from broken eggs.

This belief in progress, which you find in poets such as Keats, was in the air in the pantheism of the Romantic movement, and was given an enormous boost by the popularization of Charles Darwin's ideas and their application to fields considerably more diverse than the study of birds and mammals. The heady combination of technological achievement, medical advances, Romantic pantheism, Hegelian progressive Idealism, and social Darwinism created a climate of thought in which, to this day, a great many people not least in public life have lived and moved. The world is improving! It's our article of faith. Things are getting better. Evil is on the decline. Progress is winning. This belief in progress has received many challenges, but has remarkably survived, and flourishes. The first world war shook the old liberal idealism; Auschwitz shattered the idea of Western civilization as a place of nobility, virtue, and humanizing reason. Yet, despite everything, people still suppose that the world is basically a good place, and that its problems are more or less soluble by technology, education, "development" in the sense of "westernization," and the application or imposition of Western democracy and capitalism.

This state of affairs has led to three things in particular which I see as characterizing the new problem of evil. First, we ignore evil when it doesn't hit us in the face. You see this in the philosophy, psychology, and politics of the last century, but you don't need to look that far back. Western politicians knew perfectly well that al-Qaeda was a danger, but nobody took it too seriously until it was too late. Countries bordering the Indian Ocean knew about tsunamis, but hadn't bothered to install early warning systems. We all know that Third-World debt is a massive sore on the conscience of the world, but our politicians don't want to take it too seriously, because from our point of view the world is progressing reasonably well and we don't want to rock the economic boat — or to upset powerful interests. We all know that sexual licentiousness creates massive unhappiness in families and individual lives, but we live in the 21st century, don't we, and we don't want to say that adultery is wrong. We live in a world where politicians, media pundits, economists, and even, alas, some late-blooming liberal theologians, speak as if humankind is basically all right, the world is basically all right, and there's nothing we should make a fuss about.

So, first, we ignore evil except when it hits us in the face. Second, we are surprised by evil when it does. We like to think of small English towns as pleasant, safe places, and were shocked to the core three years ago when two little girls were murdered by someone they obviously knew and trusted. We have no categories to cope with that; but nor do we have categories to cope with the larger renewed evils such as renewed

tribalism and genocide in Africa. We like to fool ourselves that the world is basically all right, now that so many countries are either democratic or moving that way, and now that globalization has in theory enabled us to do so much, to profit so much, to know so much; and then we are puzzled as well as shocked by the human tsunami, the great wave of refugees and those seeking asylum. Terrorism itself takes us by surprise, since we are used to imagining that all serious questions should be settled 'round a discussion table, and are puzzled that some people still think that doesn't work and that they need to use more drastic methods of getting their point across. And, ultimately, we are shocked again and again by the fact of death. We ignore evil when it doesn't hit us in the face, and so we are shocked and puzzled when it does.

Thirdly, as a result, we react in immature and dangerous ways. The reaction in America and Britain to the events of September 11 has been a knee-jerk, unthinking, immature lashing out. Don't misunderstand me. The terrorist actions of al-Qaeda were and are unmitigatedly evil. But the astonishing naivety which decreed that America as a whole was a pure, innocent victim, so that the world could be neatly divided up into evil people (particularly Arabs) and good people (particularly Americans and Israelis), and that the latter had a responsibility now to punish the former, and that this justified the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, is a large-scale example of what I'm talking about — just as it is immature and naive to suggest the mirror image of this view, namely that the Western world is guilty in all respects and that all protestors and terrorists are therefore completely justified in what they do.

The Western world, then, has not been able to cope with evil from within its modernistic beliefs. Postmodernity doesn't help here, because it merely highlights the problem of evil remorselessly, while avoiding any return to a classic doctrine of Original Sin by denying that there is really anybody there in the first place. Humans themselves deconstruct; you can't escape evil, in postmodernity, but there is nobody to take the blame. There is no moral dignity left. To shoulder responsibility is the last virtue left open to those who have forsworn all other kinds; to have even that disallowed is to reduce human beings to mere ciphers; and most of us, not least the genuine victims of crime and abuse, find that both counterintuitive and disgusting. Furthermore, postmodernity's analysis of evil allows for no redemption. There is no way out, no chance of repentance and restoration, no way back to the solid ground of truth from the quicksands of deconstruction. Postmodernity may be correct to say that evil is real, powerful and important, but it gives us no real clue as to what we should do about it. It is therefore vital that we look elsewhere, and broaden the categories of the problem from the shallow modernist puzzles on the one hand and the nihilistic deconstructive analyses on the other. This sends us back to the Bible itself. What has it got to say about all this?

2. The Biblical Analysis of Evil, and of God's Answer

There are three things to say by way of introduction to this sketch of a biblical response to the new problem of evil.

First, there are no easy answers, in Scripture or elsewhere. If we think we've "solved" the problem of evil, that just shows that we haven't understood it. We cannot say, with that dreadful hymn, that "all our pain is good." That induces a moral chaos worse than that offered by Job's comforters. Nor can we say that evil is good after all because it provides a context for moral effort and even heroism, as though we could get God off the hook by making the world a theatre where God sets up little plays to give his characters

a chance to show how virtuous they really are. That is trivializing to the point of blasphemy. So, first, no easy answers.

Second, the line between good and evil does not lie between “us” and “them,” between the West and the rest, between left and right, between rich and poor. That fateful line runs down the middle of each of us, every human society, every individual. This is not to say that all humans, and all societies, are equally good or bad; far from it. Merely that we are all infected and that all easy attempts to see the problem in terms of “us” and “them” are fatally flawed.

Third, though there is indeed a radical difference in kind between the problem posed by 9-11 and the problem posed by the tsunami — no terrorists or wicked governments were responsible for the tsunami; a tectonic plate’s just got to do what a tectonic plate’s got to do — they pose, together, the great question to which the Bible is in fact written to address, even though we cannot fully understand the answers until the end.

What help then can we find in the Bible? We have already seen that the sea, both in itself and in its symbolic significance, is simultaneously part of God’s good creation and part of the continuing source of chaos and terror. We should also note, to glance ahead to the very end of the story, that God declares throughout Scripture that he is going to put the world to rights at the last, even though this will involve, in Haggai’s phrase, giving both heaven and earth one last great shake to sort everything out. Scripture seems to be trying to say that creation is good, but incomplete; and that human evil has somehow stalled the project of creation in its incomplete mode, so that humans need to be put right and the world itself needs a good shake. The biblical imagery of judgment insists over and over again that God will put the world to rights and wipe away every tear from every eye.

But how is this to come about? Here I believe we have gone astray. We have been accustomed to seeing what we call “the problem of evil” in terms of the philosophical puzzle of how to justify a good, wise, and powerful God in the face of continuing evil. We have therefore gone to the book of Job as the one part of Scripture which addresses the problem in broadly those terms. But we have failed to see that the whole of Scripture addresses the problem of evil in a different way. After Noah comes the debacle of the Tower of Babel, and immediately after that God calls Abraham, and declares that in him all the world will be blessed. The curse of evil at every level is to be undone. Those Israelite prophets and poets who saw this most clearly spoke of creation healed, of the wolf and the lamb lying down together, of swords being beaten into ploughshares, of shrubs and fruit trees coming up to replace the thorns, thistles, and briars that had defaced the garden.

And they spoke of evil itself in a variety of ways. They spoke of evil in terms of wicked nations oppressing God’s people, of wicked rulers oppressing the poor, of wicked people within society using their money or their power to oppress one another. They spoke of evil in terms of the failure of human beings in general, and of Israel in particular, to live as image-bearing human beings should, to live as the redeemed people of God ought to do. They spoke, in other words, of evil at the level both of individuals and of society; of evil as a problem infecting all, including God’s people; of evil in terms of both human wickedness and demonic activity, of structural injustice and systemic oppression and violence, particularly that of the great empires of the world. The opening chapters of

Genesis make all this extremely clear. But then, in Abraham, God declares, as an act of sovereign grace following the word and act of judgment, that a new way has opened up, a way by which the original purpose, of blessing for humankind and creation, can be taken forward. From within the story we already know that this is going to be enormously costly for God himself. The loneliness of God looking for his partners, Adam and Eve, in the garden; the grief of God before the flood; the head-shaking exasperation of God at Babel; the frustration of God at Abraham's vacillating half-obedience — all these, God knows, God will have to continue to put up with. There will be numerous further acts of judgment as well as mercy as the story unfolds. But unfold it will. The overarching picture is of the sovereign creator God who will continue to work within his world — that's the key — until blessing replaces curse, homecoming replaces exile, olive branches appear after the flood, and a new family is created in which the scattered languages can be reunited. That is the narrative which forms the outer frame for the canonical Old Testament. It's not a matter of God as a puppet-master, pulling the strings from a long way away. It's a matter of God loving his world so much that, faced with evil within it, he will work precisely within it, despite all the horrible ambiguities that will result.

The body of the Old Testament, from this point onwards, carries — and the writers know it carries — the deeply ambiguous story of how Abraham's family, the people through whom God's solution was being taken forwards, was composed of people who were themselves part of the problem. The Exodus gives the major paradigmatic Jewish answer to the question, what is God doing with evil? Evil comes here in the shape of the wicked powerful empire oppressing the enslaved Israelites. But when the people are freed, they behave themselves in a thoroughly pagan manner, as they continue to do in the deeply ambiguous entry into the Land, in the period of the Judges, and then in the monarchy. David, the man after God's own heart, is himself deeply flawed. Exile threatens, looms, and then, like a great tsunami, Babylon comes and sweeps away the Temple itself, where YHWH himself had lived in the midst of his people. And, though the people return two generations later, all is still not well. Pagan empires still lord it over them. The sea monsters still come up and attack. God's people still cry for YHWH to come and redeem them, to put the world to rights once and for all.

At the heart of the greatest prophetic book of all, that of Isaiah, we find the picture of the Servant of YHWH, who does two things at once: He represents Israel itself within the purposes of God, and he embodies God's rescue operation for Israel and the world. Indeed, it is immediately after his suffering and death in chapter 53 that we have the word of new covenant in chapter 54 and new creation in chapter 55. Somehow, the prophet is saying, the people of Israel, the bearers of the solution, have themselves become part of the problem; but as God had determined to work from within his world to rescue his world, by calling Israel in the first place, so he has determined to work from within Israel to rescue Israel, by calling this royal yet suffering figure, by equipping him with his own Spirit, and by allowing the worst that the world can do to fall upon him. If you want to understand God's justice in an unjust world, says Isaiah, this is where you must look. God's justice is a saving, healing, restorative justice, because the God to whom justice belongs is the creator God who has yet to complete his original plan for creation, and whose justice is not simply designed to restore a balance to a world out of kilter but to bring to glorious completion and fruition the creation, teeming with life and possibility, that he made in the first place. Somehow Isaiah has so redefined the broader problem of evil, of the injustice of the world and the justice of the one creator God, that we now see it, not as a philosopher's puzzle requiring explanation, but as the tragedy of all creation requiring a fresh act from the sovereign creator God, focused on the tragedy

of Israel requiring a fresh act from the sovereign covenant God. And, to our amazement and horror, we see this fresh act coming into sharp focus in the suffering and death of the Servant. Sharing the fate of Israel in exile, the exile which we know from Genesis 3 onwards is closely aligned with death itself, he bears the sin of the many. He embodies the covenant faithfulness, the restorative justice, of the sovereign God, and by his stripes “we” are healed.

Central to the Old Testament picture of God’s justice in an unjust world, then, is the picture of God’s faithfulness to unfaithful Israel; and central to that picture is the picture of YHWH’s servant, an individual who stands over against Israel, and takes Israel’s fate upon himself so that Israel may be rescued from exile and the human race proceed at last towards the new creation in which thorns and thistles will be replaced by cypress and myrtle, dust and death by new life, the chaos of the sea with the victory of the creator. Within the larger canonical context, we might see the entire book of Job alongside Isaiah as an anticipation of the harrowing scene in Gethsemane, where the comforters again fail and even creation goes dark as the monsters close in around the innocent figure who asks what it’s all about. And that leads us to the heart of this lecture. The moment when the sinfulness of humankind grieved God to his heart, the moment when the Servant was despised and rejected, the moment when Job asked God why it had to be that way, all came together when the Son of Man knelt, lonely and afraid, before going to face the might of the beasts that had come up out of the sea. The story of Gethsemane and of the cross itself present themselves in the New Testament as the strange, dark conclusion to the story of what God does about evil, of what happens to God’s justice when it takes human flesh, when it gets its feet muddy in the garden and its hands bloody on the cross. The multiple ambiguities of God’s actions in the world come together in the story of Jesus.

3. Jesus

Theologies of the cross, of atonement, have not in my view grappled sufficiently with the larger problem of evil, as normally conceived. Conversely, those who have written about “the problem of evil” within philosophical theology have not normally grappled sufficiently with the cross as part of both the analysis and the solution of that problem. The two have been held apart, in a mismatch, with “the problem of evil” on the one hand being conceived simply in terms of “how could a good and powerful God allow evil into the world in the first place?” and “the atonement” on the other hand being seen in terms simply of personal forgiveness. Much modern Christian thought has accepted the framework offered by the Enlightenment, in which the Christian faith *rescues* people *from* the evil world, ensuring them forgiveness in the present and heaven hereafter. The Enlightenment-based wider world has then accepted that evaluation of the Christian faith — not surprisingly, since it was driving it in the first place — and so has not thought it necessary to factor in Christian theology to its own discussions of “the problem of evil.” How, after all, does a hymn like “There is a green hill far away” have anything at all to say to a world dumbstruck in horror at the first world war, at Auschwitz, at Hiroshima, at 9-11?

With this in mind, we need to re-read the Gospels as what they are. People often observe that there is not that much “atonement-theology” in the Gospels. Mark’s “theology of the cross” often seemed to be reduced to one key verse, 10:45, which speaks of the Son of Man coming “to give his life a ransom for many.” The Lord’s Supper gave hints towards an atonement-theology, and the crucifixion narratives, especially in

their evocation of biblical allusions, provided some further elements. But for the most part the Gospels, as read within the mainstream tradition both of scholarship and of church life, had little to contribute, except as a general narrative backcloth to an atonement theology grounded elsewhere, in Paul, Hebrews, and 1 Peter.

But when we read the Gospels in a more holistic fashion, we find that they tell a double story, drawing together the themes I have spoken of so far. They tell the story of how the evil in the world — political, social, personal, moral, emotional — reached its height; and they tell how God's long-term plan for Israel — and for himself! — finally came to its climax. And they tell both of these stories in and as the story of how Jesus of Nazareth announced God's kingdom and went to his violent death. The Gospels, read in this way, offer us both a richer theology of atonement than we are used to and also a deeper understanding of the problem of evil itself and what can and must be done about it in our own day. The Gospels have more to say about terrorism and tsunamis than we might imagine.

Watch as they tell how all the varied forces of evil are involved in putting Jesus on the cross. They tell how the political powers of the world reached their full, arrogant height: Rome and Herod stand in the near background of the story, and so, too, does Caiaphas and his corrupt Jerusalem regime. All three come into focus as the cross comes closer. So, too, the Gospels tell the story of corruption within Israel itself. The Pharisees offer a hard-edged interpretation of Torah which excludes the inbreaking of God's kingdom through Jesus. The revolutionaries try to get in on the act of God's inbreaking kingdom, but they, the terrorists of their day, try to fight violence with violence and so merely collude with the real problem of evil. The death of Jesus, when it comes, is the work not only of the pagan nations but of the Israel that has reduced itself to saying that it has no king but Caesar.

The Gospels also tell the story in terms of the deeper, darker demonic forces which operate at a supra-personal level. These forces operate through all of the human elements I've mentioned, but cannot be reduced to terms of them. The shrieking demons that yell at Jesus, that rush at him out of the tombs, are signs that a battle has been joined at a more than personal level. The stormy sea, the miniature but deadly tsunamis on Galilee, evoke ancient Israelite imagery of an evil which is more than the sum total of present wrongdoing and woe. "The power of darkness" to which Jesus alludes immediately before his betrayal suggests that on that night evil was being given a free rein to do its worst, with the soldiers, the betrayer, the muddle disciples and the corrupt court its mere instruments. The mocking bystanders as Jesus hangs on the cross ("If you are the son of God . . .") echo the taunting, tempting voice that had whispered in the desert. The power of death itself, the ultimate denial of the goodness of creation, speaks of a force of destruction, of anti-world, anti-God power being allowed to do its worst. The Gospels tell this whole story in order to say that the tortured young Jewish prophet hanging on the cross was the point where evil, including the violence of terror and the non-human forces that work through creation, had become truly and fully and totally itself. The Gospels tell the story of the *downward spiral* of evil. One thing leads to another; the remedy offered against evil has itself the germ of evil within it, so that its attempt to put things right merely produces second-order evil. And so on. Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial are simply among the last twists of this story, with the casual injustice of Caiaphas and Pilate and the mocking of the crowds at the cross tying all the ends together.

Once we learn to read the Gospels in this holistic fashion, we hear them telling us that the death of Jesus is the result both of the major *political* evil of the world, the power-games which the world was playing as it still does, *and* of the dark, accusing forces which stand behind those human and societal structures, forces which accuse creation itself of being evil, and so try to destroy it while its creator is longing to redeem it. The Gospels tell the story of Jesus' death as the story of how the downward spiral of evil finally hit the bottom, with the violent and bloody execution of *this* man, this prophet who had announced God's kingdom.

The Gospels thus tell the story of Jesus, and particularly of his death, as the story of how cosmic and global evil, in its suprapersonal as well as personal forms, are met by the sovereign, saving love of Israel's God, YHWH, the creator of the world. They write intentionally to draw the whole Old Testament narrative to its climax, seeing that narrative precisely as the story of God's strange and dark solution to the problem of evil from Genesis 3 onwards. What the Gospels offer is not a philosophical explanation of evil, what it is or why it's there, but the story of an *event* in which the living God *deals with it*. Like the exodus from Egypt, or the return from Babylon, only now with fully cosmic reach, God has rescued his people from the dark powers of chaos. The sea monsters have done their worst, and God has vindicated his people and put creation to rights. And he has done so *through* the suffering of Israel's representative, the Messiah. This is what it looks like when YHWH says, as in Exodus 4, "I have heard the cry of my people, and I have come down to set them free." This is what it looks like when YHWH says "Behold, my servant." As Isaiah says later (chapter 59), it was no messenger, no angel, but his own presence that saved them; in all their affliction he was afflicted. God chose the appropriate and necessarily deeply ambiguous route of acting from *within* his creation, from *within* his chosen people, to take the full force of evil upon himself and so exhaust it. And the result is that the covenant is renewed; that sins are forgiven; that the long night of sorrow, exile and death is over and the new day has dawned. New creation has begun, the new world in which violence will be overcome and the sea will be no more.

The Gospels thus tell the story, unique in the world's great literature, religious theories, and philosophies: the story of the creator God taking responsibility for what's happened to creation, bearing the weight of its problems on his own shoulders. As Sydney Carter put it in one of his finest songs, "It's God they ought to crucify, instead of you and me." Or, as one old evangelistic tract put it, the nations of the world got together to pronounce sentence on God for all the evils in the world, only to realize with a shock that God had already served his sentence. The tidal wave of evil crashed over the head of God himself. The spear went into his side like a plane crashing into a great building. God has been there. He has taken the weight of the world's evil on his own shoulders. This is not an explanation. It is not a philosophical conclusion. It is an event in which, as we gaze on in horror, we may perhaps glimpse God's presence in the deepest darkness of our world, God's strange unlooked-for victory over the evil of our world; and then, and only then, may glimpse also God's vocation to us to work with him on the new solution to the new problem of evil.

4. Implementation

I spoke earlier of the shallow analysis of evil and of the immature reactions which it produces. It is fascinating that the best-known of the gospel "atonement" passages

occurs in the context of a sharp saying of Jesus about the nature of political power and the subversion of it by the gospel events themselves.

The request of James and John, that they should sit on either side of Jesus when he comes into his kingly power, is a political question which receives a political answer: earthly rulers lord it over their subjects, but it must not be so among you. Rather, those who are great must be the servants, and those who are chief must be slaves of all, because the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. This evocation of Isaiah 53, in a manner entirely true to the original context, sits in the middle of the *political analysis of empire*, and subverts that empire, based as it is on violence, by showing how all the traditions of Israel, the people through whom God would address and solve the problem of the world's evil, converge on a figure who takes all that Babylon, all that Rome, can do to him and exhausts and defeats it. We find the same point in Luke 9:54, where once more James and John want to do things in the world's way, calling down fire from heaven on their enemies. Jesus' rebuke to them is directly cognate with the "Father, forgive them," which he gasps out on the cross.

What then is the result? The call of the Gospel is for the church to *implement* the victory of God in the world. The cross is not just an example to be followed; it is an achievement to be worked out, put into practice. But it is an example nonetheless, because it is the exemplar, the template, the model, for what God now wants to do, by his Spirit, in the world, through his people. It is the start of the process of redemption, in which suffering and martyrdom are the paradoxical means by which victory is won. The suffering love of God, lived out again by the Spirit in the lives of God's people, is the God-given answer to the evils of the world.

But what if (someone will ask) — what if the people who now bear the solution become themselves part of the problem, as happened before? Yes, that is a danger, and it must be addressed. The church is never more at risk than when it sees itself merely as the solution-bearer, and forgets that every day it must say "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner," and allow that confession to work its way into genuine humility even as it stands boldly before the world and its crazy empires. In particular, it is a problem when a "Christian" empire seeks to impose its will, dualistically, on the world, by labeling other parts of the world "evil" while seeing itself as the avenging army of God. That is more or less exactly what Jesus found in the Israel of his day, what he saw in James and John. The cross was and is a call to a different vocation, a new way of dealing with evil, ultimately a new vision of God.

What, after all, would it look like if the true God came to deal with evil? Would he come in a blaze of glory, in a pillar of cloud and fire, surrounded by legions of angels? Jesus of Nazareth took the total risk of speaking and acting as if the answer to the question were this: When the true God comes back to deal with evil, he will look like a young Jewish prophet journeying to Jerusalem at Passover time, celebrating the kingdom, confronting the corrupt authorities, feasting with his friends, succumbing in prayer and agony to a cruel and unjust fate, taking upon himself the weight of Israel's sin, the world's sin, Evil with a capital E. When we look at Jesus in this way we discover that the cross has become for us the new Temple, the place where we go to meet the true God and know him as savior and redeemer. The cross becomes the place of pilgrimage where we stand and gaze at what was done for each one of us. The cross becomes the sign by which, and by which alone, we go to address the wickedness of the world. The cross

becomes the sign that pagan empire, symbolized in the might and power of sheer brutal force, has been decisively challenged by a different power, the power of love — and that this decisive challenge shall win the day. That is the Christian answer to the problems which are summed up for us in 9-11.

What then about the tsunami? There is of course no straightforward answer. But there are small clues.

We are not to suppose that the world as it currently is, is the way God intends it to be at the last. Some serious thinkers, including some contemporary physicists, would actually link the convulsions which still happen in the world to evil perpetrated by humans; and it is indeed fair enough to probe for deeper connections than modernist science has imagined between human behavior and the total environment of our world, including tectonic plates. But I find it somewhat easier to suppose that the project of creation, the good world which God made at the beginning, was supposed to go forward under the wise stewardship of the human race, God's vice-gerents, God's image-bearers; and that, when the human race turned to worship creation instead of God, the project could not proceed in the intended manner, but instead bore thorns and thistles, volcanoes and tsunamis, the terrifying wrath of the creation which we humans had treated as if it were divine.

When we then go to the Gospels for help, we should listen to what they actually say. Matthew tells the story of God-with-us, Emmanuel, with us in the middle of the swirling, raging waters, asleep in the boat on the lake, vulnerable to the screams of the demoniacs and the plots of the Pharisees, undermined by his own associates and finally hunted down by the chief priests and handed over to the imperial authorities. Matthew would forbid us to ask the question about the tsunami in terms of a God who sits upstairs and pulls the puppet-strings to make things happen, or not, as the case may be, down here. We can and must only tell the story in terms of the God who is with his people in the midst of the mighty waters: the God who was swept off his feet and out to sea, the God who lost his parents and family, the God who was crushed under falling concrete and buried in mud. And then we have to learn to tell the story, as well, in terms of the God who rescued others while not saving himself; the God who worked night and day to recover bodies and some still alive; the God who rushed to the scene with all the help he can muster; the God who gave not only generously but lavishly to help the relief effort. Truly, if we believe in Matthew's God, the Emmanuel, we must learn to see God in that way. Remember that when Jesus died the earth shook and the rocks were torn in pieces, while the sky darkened at noon. God the creator will not always save us *from* these dark forces, but he will save us in them, being with us in the darkness and promising us, always promising us, that the new creation which began at Easter will one day be complete, and that with that completion there will be full healing, full understanding, full reconciliation, full consolation. The thorns and thistles will be replaced by the cypress and myrtle. There will be no more sea.

The Gospels then pose the question to us at every level, questions about what we have called the atonement as well as questions about what we have called the problem of evil. Dare we stand in front of the cross and admit that all that was done for us? Dare we take all the meanings of the word "God" and allow them to be re-centered upon, redefined by, this man, this moment, this death? Dare we take the chaos of the dark forces within our own selves and allow Jesus to rebuke them as he rebuked the wind

and waves on the Sea of Galilee? Dare we address the consequences of what Jesus himself said, that the rulers of the world behave in one way, but that we must not do it like that? Dare we thus put atonement theology and political theology together, with the deeply personal message on one side and the utterly practical and political message on the other, and turn away from the way of James and John, the way of calling down fire from heaven on our enemies, and embrace the way of Jesus himself? Dare we live out the message of God's restorative justice, claiming the victory of the cross not only over the obvious wickednesses of the world but over the wickednesses of those who want to fight fire with fire, to bring a solution by creating further problems? And dare we stand at the foot of the cross, feeling the storm clouds darken overhead and the earth tremble beneath our feet, and pray once more for God to finish his new creation, to make the wolf and the lamb lie down together, to bid the mighty waves of the sea be still and depart for good, to establish the new heavens and new earth in which justice and joy will dwell for ever?

Evil is still a four-letter word; so, thank God, is love. God grant us grace to be so filled with that love that we may work in our own day with mature, Christian, and sober intelligence to address the problem of evil, to implement the victory achieved once for all on the cross, and to be agents, heralds, and living embodiments of that new creation in which the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

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