



God, COVID-19, and Natural Woe

Justifying God in the Midst of a Pandemic

By S. J. Hatch

In early April 2020, Jonah Goldberg observed in *The Dispatch* that one thing we were not hearing much of in this time of COVID-19 is any discussion of theodicy, that is, the justification of the existence, power, and goodness of God in the face of evil. It is an astute observation; in other times, there usually would be someone saying that this was “God’s judgment” for one or another thing; no one is saying that now. Among the reasons Goldberg speculates behind this absence is the broad fact that religion is just not as important a factor in American life as it used to be. This is true and well-documented, but I would go one step further: even among the religious, God is often not held in awe. This is what makes the current situation so ironic. For as much talk among Christians as there is about God’s sovereignty and goodness, it rarely goes much deeper than that. More discussion is focused on debates over the legitimacy of curtailing worship services than on what COVID-19 tells us of God’s working through such woes. We need a bigger vision of God, and with that, reasons to help us understand how He is operating in times like this.

To be sure, “theodicy” is not an everyday word, so let me be practical: if we cannot understand *how* God works in circumstances producing suffering – even without knowing *why* He is doing things – then it will be difficult to trust Him. In the end, platitudes cannot sustain us. Suffering is such an experiential crucible that we cannot live without finding some kind of meaning in it. Suffering will challenge our view of reality, of God, and of man, and, left to our own devices, it will lead us to distorted manmade views of God that ultimately fail to deliver hope. Worse, it will drive us outright to despair and hopelessness. The need to justify God in the face of suffering, then, is not and should not be merely an exercise for academics: if God is who the Bible describes Him as being, then we can *only* have hope if we have a biblically-based realism of God, of man, and of our circumstances.

In saying this, I fully recognize that when someone is in the midst of suffering and crying out “Why?” then the first ministry response needs to be to actively listen and not necessarily rush in with a theological answer. Even Job’s associates got this right in showing up, shutting up, sitting with him, and grieving with him for a time (Job 2:11-13). There is also wisdom in recognizing that the significance of what one is suffering may not be immediately apparent; indeed, it may become so only in time, perhaps a long time. So, we need to mark our words carefully, and provide encouragement from the Gospel. Still, at some point, suffering brings to the fore the questions of why this is happening and who God is, and ministry requires more thoughtful answers to undergird the comfort and truth of the Gospel.



As a starting point, we need to recover a distinction which historically theologians have drawn between “moral evil” and “natural evil,” although for the latter the term “natural woe” is probably better. The distinctions have largely disappeared from our modern lexicon, but they provide much-needed precision. Put simply, moral evil is evil done directly or indirectly *by people with intent*. Abuse, oppression, depravity, and violence are

examples of moral evils. People are specifically responsible for doing such things, and in Christian terms this is typically what we would call sin. Natural woe, on the other hand, are *those misfortunes for which people as moral actors are not culpable*. This would include such things like natural disasters and, of course, diseases like COVID-19. People's actions may exacerbate those things, but do not cause them. Christians agree that both moral evil and natural woe came in with the Fall, but often confuse the relationship between the two, and thereby confuse how to judge whether God or man is responsible for what comes to pass.

There are three positions Christians typically gravitate toward in understanding natural woe, and these positions differ in how they view God's working, man's responsibility, and the hope (or lack thereof) which they hold out.

Man's suffering is due largely to a lack of faith or good behavior. This is a reward-retribution theology, that is, God rewards you if you do good things and punishes you if you do bad things. This is the theology of Job's associates in the Book of Job. They thought that because he was suffering, he must have done something really wrong to merit what he was experiencing. All suffering, whether moral evil or natural woe, is man's fault directly. God is only giving people what they deserve. This view is straight moralism and is probably the default mode for most of humanity. The most egregious form of this thinking among Christians is the so-called "Prosperity Gospel," which holds that whatever you want, you are to "name it and claim it in the name of Jesus." This sees God as like Santa Claus – He exists to give us goodies and make us happy. It sounds good until someone experiences suffering or loss, at which point the presence and persistence of suffering or grief is only explained by charging that the individual does not have enough faith or is somehow not pleasing God. The "hope" that it holds out is try harder to do better and believe more fervently. There is no comfort in this, especially if one feels that he or she cannot do any more than what they have done.

God does not exist for the sole purpose of making us happy. He exists and acts radically independent of us and everything else. If we are to truly understand suffering, we need come to grip with this fact.

This view is also fundamentally unbiblical. The Prosperity Gospel clearly is a false Gospel (Gal. 1:6-10), but even more subtle forms of moralism tend in the same direction. Biblically speaking, while there is truth to the idea that God rewards what is good and punishes what is wrong, Scripture also shows that suffering is not always the result of sins, and rewards are not always the result of good behavior. This can be seen in Job (again), in the Psalms, and really, throughout the Bible. Even our Lord Himself says that some who have died in particularly tragic ways were no worse sinners than others (Luke 13:1-5). In Scripture, there is a reality and a dimension to suffering that transcends simplistic rewards and retribution. Moreover, contrary to the Prosperity Gospel, the Bible also shows that God does not exist to make us happy. Rather, He exists and acts radically independent of us and everything else. When God reveals Himself to Job at the end of that book (chs. 38-41), He does not explain Job's suffering nor promise comfort, but rather, through a series of rhetorical questions, asserts His sovereign greatness. Job wisely responds not with counter questions, but with humility and repentance (Job 40:3-5, 42:1-6). Likewise, we need to have an awe of God.

Natural woe is the byproduct of God creating a world that respects man's free will.

This is more sophisticated than the first position and is popular among evangelical Christians today. God has created the world to work according to fixed natural laws because that environment best facilitates man's free choice. It is only against the backdrop of a predictable universe with consistent consequences that our choices can have significance. Thus, things like natural disasters follow the inexorable laws of nature, and God is not going to change that for our convenience. Moreover, some things which people experience are not necessarily evil, even if they are painful or unpleasant, for example, falling down and breaking one's arm. Following from this, because God has given man free will, He will limit His own actions so as to avoid trampling man's free will. God didn't cause these evils to happen, but He can use them. This view has a certain ring of plausibility to it, and no less an apologist than C. S. Lewis advocated for it.¹ Still, this is not workable – indeed, I do not think it was workable even for Lewis.

In Lewis's 1955 autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, he noted that he lost his faith in God at ten years of age when his mother died of cancer. After he returned to the Christian faith as an adult, one of the first apologetical books he wrote was *The Problem of Pain* (1940), and there he propounded an explanation for natural woe akin to that given above. In 1956, he married Joy Davidman Gresham, and when she died in 1960 – ironically, of cancer, just as his mother had – Lewis went into a spiritual tailspin. In 1961 he published pseudonymously the book, *A Grief Observed*, which consisted of private notebooks he kept while grieving. *A Grief Observed* is essentially his primal scream at God and shows how close he came to losing his faith. That he did not lose faith is to God's praise, but it is clear that the intellectual answer he gave earlier to the problem of natural woe in *The Problem of Pain* did nothing for him in grappling with the searing loss of his wife to the evil of cancer.

Why does this view ultimately fail to give comfort? For all of its intellectual sophistication, it is logically confused, overly abstract, and tries to exonerate both God and man ultimately by assuming a fundamental randomness in the universe.

The theologians and pastors I have heard talk in this manner often blur the distinction between moral evil and natural woe by lumping everything under the view that, "We live in a fallen world." While this is true, it misses a fundamental point about culpability: moral evil is caused by men; natural woe is not. People intuitively understand the notion that men do evil to one another. They don't understand why things like accidents, diseases, and natural disasters exist to harm people. COVID-19 is not a moral actor. The causality of the one is not the causality of the other and conflating the two only begs more questions.

This confusion is exacerbated by abstraction. This view assumes that nature operates on autopilot and that God is not actively involved in overseeing, sustaining, or directing it. In this regard, natural woe is merely a side effect or a random occurrence in the way that things work. Indeed, this presupposition is so embedded in our consciousness that it may well explain why we have not seen much discussion of theodicy in the current COVID-19 pandemic: in the popular mind, "stuff happens." Considering natural woe as an unfortunate side effect, however, runs contrary to the reality of pain and suffering which we feel. The suffering caused by losing one's livelihood or home due to a natural disaster, or by physical pain from a terminal disease, or by the emotional pain of losing a loved one is serious pain. It is not like breaking

¹ C. S. Lewis, "Divine Omnipotence" in *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 23-32. This is as close as Lewis gets to the topic of natural woe. Even in Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, his focus is on explaining moral evil, not natural woe.

one's arm. Suggesting it is a "side effect" does not do justice to the depth of what we feel. This may be a large part of the reason why Lewis's own formulation did not work for him. While seemingly sophisticated, it is emotionally distant.

There is a deeper problem in positing the idea that natural woe is just randomness. One can talk about a single random occurrence, and odd though it may be, it would not change our sense that there is a coherent universal order. But there are so many natural woes in the world that if they are all attributable to random occurrences, then we are compelled to say that randomness and chaos are at the root of life. And if randomness is behind all that we see and experience, then there is no assurance of any predictability, no coherence to life, and no purpose to give life meaning. Can we really accept the logical consequences of such thoughts? Can we really accept that our suffering or that of loved ones or the loss of others ultimately is meaningless? In the anguish of our souls, I doubt we can.

Moreover, if randomness is behind the natural woes we see, then that would be outside the purview, knowledge, and possibly even the control of God. This is simply definitional: if it was within the purview, knowledge, and control of God, then it would not truly be random and the real question we would need to grapple with is why did God not prevent such natural woes

Ascribing natural woe to randomness in the universe does not solve the problem of suffering. Rather, it makes God to be a bystander at best and empties suffering of any potential for real meaning.

in the first place or deal with them once they emerged? The free will angle obscures this more fundamental question about the nature of God. No one is clamoring to have a tornado wipe out their home or to get COVID-19; there is not a free will issue that God needs to respect. People want God to intervene to prevent these woes, so why doesn't He? Because this view is man-centered, it cannot answer that question. Moreover, the emphasis on God's self-restraint leads to a view of God that makes Him out to be less than the absolute God of the Bible.

And this gets us into the final reason why this view is problematic and that is that it presumes a God who is too small and too limited. At best, one has the picture of a God who is inconsistent in dealing with natural woes. In some cases, he heals people or spares them from greater suffering, and in other cases He doesn't. But what is the rationale for the difference? If one takes this view to its logical conclusion then the notion of God restraining Himself to leave room for man's free will eventually ends up with a Deistic God, a God who created things, but then left them to run of their own accord. Such a result is logically necessary because at some point God would have to violate someone's free will, and the only way He could avoid doing that is to do nothing at all. At best, maybe such a God sympathizes deeply with our pain—but is such a passive God worthy of our worship? Probably not. This brings me to the last of the three positions to consider on natural woes.

Natural woe is part of the sovereign plan of God. The picture of a restrained, self-constrained, or passive God described above is not the picture of God we get from the Bible. The Bible shows that God is more than willing to violate man's free will when it suits Him. Joseph's brothers, for example, did not want Joseph to rule over them; Moses did not want to go to Egypt and confront Pharaoh; Paul on the road to Damascus sought the death of Christians.

In every case, God overruled their free wills for an overarching purpose He had in mind in which He would use them. The Bible clearly shows that God is unceasingly active all the time in the lives of His creatures, and this is part of the reason why we pray to Him in the first place. We expect that He can and will do things about the pain we are suffering or the grief we are feeling and that He has a purpose in it. God is fully engaged with His creation, and that is a far more natural thing to expect than the Deistic notion that He created everything and then walked away from it for no particular reason.

Many Christians recoil from this view, however, on the basis of two objections. First, they feel that it reduces people to puppets with no free will, with God compelling every action we take, and, second, they feel it makes God the author of all our pain and of all evil. Rightly understood, however, neither of these are true, and the keys to understanding this rest in appreciating both God's use of secondary means and His overarching purposes.

The doctrine of secondary means is often mentioned, rarely explained, and usually underappreciated. But it is central in explaining the means through which God achieves His ends. Think, for example, about how we interact with other people: if we want someone to do something, we can coerce or compel them, and sometimes we do that. But that is not usually how we operate, and there are a range of other means we will use. Positively, we could provide arguments to persuade them, invoke things to motivate them, and/or appeal to their emotions. Negatively, we could warn them, rebuke them, or refrain from giving them support or encouragement for things we do not want them to do. Depending on our relationship to the person—for example, if one were a parent, a teacher, or an employer—we could even widen or narrow the range of options they have for a given decision. The better we know a person, the more subtle our engagement with them can be, and the more likely we will succeed in getting them to do what we want. We will know what buttons to push, what to refrain from, and how far we can go. None of that takes away from the fact that the decisions they make are still their own. If we can do this in human interactions, then how much more can God do that, who knows us far more intimately than we know even ourselves? He works with an infinite range of means, toward more overarching goals, over longer periods of time, with all people simultaneously. Such complexity staggers our imagination but begins to give us a glimpse into the plan of God. At the same time, even from this faint glimpse we can see that it is far more realistic and interactive in engaging people than the caricatured view of God's sovereignty that relies on coercion alone. Indeed, it compels us to stand in humble awe of such a God.

This understanding of secondary means also helps counter the charge that this all-encompassing view of God's sovereignty makes God necessarily culpable for evil. Here we need to provide some clarifications as to what precisely we are talking about. Contemporary society has greatly debased the notion of culpability, such that anyone or anything *contributing to* an evil coming to pass is therefore *responsible for* that evil. For example, some try to argue that if a gun seller sold a weapon to a teenager who used it in a school shooting, the gun seller should be held liable for the deaths resulting from that shooting. But under the same logic, one could just as reasonably hold the victims responsible for their own deaths if they taunted, rebuffed, or ignored the shooter before the incident, thereby in his mind giving him justification for retaliating. Intuitively, however, we know this is absurd and not right. The person who actually committed an act is the one responsible for it, with his culpability mitigated or aggravated in degree by his motives and intent. To say otherwise is to make everyone responsible in some way for everything, which in practical terms means no one is responsible for anything; that leaves the notion of culpability meaningless.

In the case of moral evil, God's *permitting* things to happen or *not restraining* them from happening does not mean that He *causes* them to happen. God may allow us to sin but will never compel us to sin. If we sin, we do so because of the sinful desires within us. With natural woes like COVID-19, however, God can be said to be culpable, since such woes are not caused by human actions, even as they may be exacerbated by them. This fact brings matters to a head: if God is responsible, active, and can do something about that which is causing our pain and suffering, then why doesn't He? This is where we have to acknowledge that God is a free actor, indeed, the only truly free actor who is not dependent on anyone or anything. As such, He is driven only by His purposes.

And what are those purposes? We variously think of God's purposes as enforcing some cosmic rules, or fostering human flourishing in some vague sense, or even just to make us happy. These are creation-centric purposes, as if God exists for our benefit. Biblically understood, however, God's purposes for man have God as their touchstone. God created man to bear His image to creation and would be glorified in man leading creation to worship God. This was to be a noble position, a position of honor, and man was to have communion with God. Man,

however, demanded his autonomy from God through the sin in Eden. God's glory will still be satisfied, but now it will be satisfied by the execution of His justice on the rebellion of some and the display of His mercy on others. God's goal, ultimately, is the coming of His Kingdom, in which man's opposition is fully defeated, God's rule is fully manifested, and God's people are brought into full communion with Him, having been fully sanctified and purified. All things, by the plan of God, are directed toward these eschatological ends. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans, "*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*" (Rom. 8:28). Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead is part of these "things." Through that, God's people are reconciled to Himself.

But there is more in this as well. God is sanctifying His people and fitting them for communion with Him in glory. As part of this, the Westminster Confession of Faith's chapter on providence (5.5) lists that among the reasons His people suffer is to enable them to see the hidden strength of the deceitfulness and corruption in their hearts, to chastise and humble them, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence on Himself, and to make them more watchful against future sin.

More could be said, but this provides a context for natural woes. Rather than being random side effects of the Fall, God uses these means to these ends. In particular, He uses things like COVID-19 to draw the attention of men back to Himself in repentance, to break their stubborn will, to display His glory in overcoming such challenges, and to sanctify His people with whom He will commune forever. Suffering under such hard providences will be difficult; it certainly will not be meaningless.

Difficult as it is to discern the significance of suffering in the moment, we need to remember that its meaning is intertwined with God's overarching purposes, which He has already revealed.



That our suffering has meaning but only in God's economy is the real crux of the issue. I say this fully mindful of people I know who have suffered and even died from debilitating diseases and unexpected accidents over the years. I think of one woman in college who while biking, lost control of her bicycle and when she hit the ground her heart stopped and she died. I had another friend who while pregnant knew months before her due date that the baby she was carrying had a rare condition which ensured that the baby would not live more than a few hours after birth. I think of another dear friend my own age, a dedicated serviceman, good athlete, and serious historian, who died of early onset Alzheimer's. There are still others who have suffered from cancer or other debilitating diseases. There is nothing to suggest that they somehow merited their suffering. Nor could I point them or others in the direction of a God who was so self-limited as to be effectively a bystander. There is no hope or meaning in such a concept of God.

The idea of a truly sovereign God who has incorporated pain and suffering into His plan and has a purpose for such things is a hard thing to accept. To accept it requires humility, since the God that stands behind all reality is One who does not fit into our neat little boxes. Nevertheless, such a God is One who truly offers hope for the afflicted. Meaning comes from purpose and purpose must be personal. An impersonal, random universe cannot supply meaning, since there is no ultimate end towards which things are directed. If you are not a Christian and you are reading this, then I would encourage you to seriously examine what the basis is for any meaning you are clinging to and whether that hope is sure and unchanging. Is hope that we invent for ourselves really satisfying? My sense is no, because for hope to be real it must transcend us. In the Christian vision of reality, God has purposes for our suffering that transcend our personal safety, comfort, or pleasure. And if there is meaning in our suffering, then there is also meaning in what we have to live for.