

Creation groans: Evil should be mourned but not ascribed to any greater divine purpose

From the Editors in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

It is hard to speak theologically about the Indian Ocean tsunami without being banal or obscene. To say the event reminds us of our finitude or our inability to control nature is to mumble platitudes. To say God willed such devastation for some greater reason is to administer a theological slap to the tear-stained faces of all who mourn, especially the parents who mourn their drowned children. To say God was powerless to do anything to stop the disaster may make the divine seem less monstrous, but it leaves us with no God worthy of the name.

The Bible itself is notably reticent to answer the question “why” in the face of suffering. The most direct response is in the Book of Job, and when Job’s friends try to explain his fate, they are censured. Job, at the center of the whirlwind, has no answer save God’s own presence. When Jesus is asked about the evil of a tower falling on innocent people, he sternly discourages any attempt to derive a moral, and he suggests that the interrogators need to learn repentance. At the heart of his own story is a tortured death and an agonized scream of a prayer that apparently goes unanswered.

When early Christians like St. Augustine described evil as a “privation of the good,” as literally *no thing*, they did not mean that it was an illusion but that it was a lack, an absence where a good thing is meant to be. You cannot pick up a handful of evil. Evil is the twisting into a grotesque shape of something meant for good in God’s creation.

An understanding of creation as good-but-fallen is opposed to the ancient view that respected the reality of evil by describing it as locked in an evenly matched struggle with good (Manicheanism). It is opposed as well to the ancient and modern misstep of picturing God as actively inflicting evil. Augustine’s approach refuses to explain

evil at all, other than to offer strictures for how not to think about it. Evil should be mourned, and redressed as far as we are able, but not ascribed to any greater divine purpose.

Neither this nor any other account offers comfort to those who grieve across South Asia. Nor will it comfort us when catastrophes strike. But it does honor scripture's refusal to moralize about evil. It is aligned with St. Paul's description of the Spirit groaning within us when we lack words to pray amid the tumult of a still unredeemed creation, which itself is groaning. It makes a space to grieve without the weight of an unfounded moralism. And it befits a God who neither wills evil nor is powerless against it, but whose power is expressed precisely in becoming incarnate to taste evil personally, and who descends to the depths of hell itself.