

Making Sense of the Newtown Tragedy (The Problem of Evil in the World)

By Pastor Kelly Sensenig

One newspaper read like this: “A man armed with two semiautomatic pistols killed 20 children at an elementary school Friday in a rampage that left 27 people dead and one injured in this suburban town before he took his own life, authorities said. Police said the suspect, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, entered Sandy Hook Elementary School and began firing shortly after 9:30 a.m., concentrating on two classrooms. It was the second-worst campus shooting in U.S. history.”

The pastor and church family of Berean Bible Church want to express their deepest sympathy and condolences to the families that have lost loved ones in this terrible tragedy. Our hearts have been heavy in view of your personal losses. Our prayer is that God would reveal Himself to everyone in a saving, sufficient, and satisfying manner. Only God can heal the brokenhearted (Luke 4:18).

The Christian can understand why evil acts occur in the world.

We understand this for two reasons.

I. History repeats itself

The horrific shootings in Newtown on Friday December 14, 2012 bear some similarities to an event which happened two thousand years ago when King Herod decided to slay a large number of very young children.

a. Children have been targeted in the past.

Matthew 2:16

“Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.”

In both cases, the events in Bethlehem and Newtown, very young children were targeted as victims. In the incident of the Bethlehem infants, the

victims were two years old or younger. What a sad and dreadful day this was for many families. In a similar way, children in Connecticut were targeted around the celebration of Christ's birth. Our hearts go out to the families who have lost children and loved ones so close to Christmas.

b. Satan has murdered children in the past.

Satan has always been behind the murder of children. History again proves this to be true not only in the case of Herod but many instances of child sacrifice.

Jeremiah 32:35

“And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.”

This refers to sacrificing children to heathen gods. What a horrific practice. Satan is always behind idolatrous acts (1 Cor. 10:20). People can't figure out why these mass murders take place but let us never forget who the ultimate enemy is in relationship to killing children in a senseless manner. It is Satan.

John 10:10 typifies Satan:

“The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

Many psychologists will tell you that this man was severely depressed and mentally unstable. Maybe he was all these things. But more than any of these things, He was demon influenced. The devil is always behind these types of senseless murders. Humanism calls this type of person a madman but God calls them a demon-possessed man.

c. Towns of peace have become tear-filled in the past.

Both tragedies took place in very quiet towns where this type of violence was not the norm. Both killing sprees resulted in excessive grief and sorrow among family members and others who lived within these towns.

Matthew 2:18

“In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.”

History often repeats itself. These two obscure towns, Bethlehem and Newtown, became a place for heartache and despair. The hearts of people were torn apart as a result of the evil murders that occurred.

d. Depravity of the human heart was seen in the past.

Both events in Bethlehem and Newtown shockingly served to illustrate the depths of human depravity, reminding us that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

Jeremiah 17:9

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”

The human heart unchecked by conscience and God can commit terrible acts of sin. Who can know it? Certainly the shrinks and psychologists can't understand it. The heart of man is capable of committing sins that are violent and reprehensible.

e. Family members were killed in the past.

The wickedness of the heart of the killers, both Herod and the Newtown killer, attacked family members. The Newtown killer murdered his own mother; historically we know that Herod murdered a wife and a son. Luke 3:19 speaks of “all the evils that Herod had done” which would include these murderous acts. These brutal acts led Emperor Augustus to make this statement, "It is better to be Herod's hog than to be his son!"

f. Christ's birth was associated with the past.

Both mass murder events were associated with Christmas, with the Newtown families looking forward to celebrating Christmas and with the Bethlehem event being the sacred record pertaining to the original birth of Christ.

The same God who worked out His wonderful purposes two millennia ago at the time of Christ's birth has also worked out His sovereign plan and purpose today as we have gone through another Christmas Day.

II. God reveals Himself

With the senseless killing of innocent children many will bring up the age-old question of evil. Why does God allow evil to occur in the world? The answer is simple; God chooses to reveal Himself to others through evil acts. One thing is certain; God is not the author of sin and death, but He does allow it for His own purpose which is ultimately His own glory. God wants us to see His glory (the character of His person shining brightly) in spite of the great sinful atrocities occurring in the world. Unbeknown to many, evil does glorify God.

a. God's glory through evil

Psalm 76:10

“Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.”

The Bible teaches that the railings against God and what is right are actually turned into praise to God. Against the backdrop of evil and the blackness of sin, God's holiness and righteousness shines all the more. Also, God uses the wrath of man to accomplish His plan and purpose in the world which also brings glory to Him. This is seen in the incident of the cross and wicked people slaying the innocent Christ (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).

Sin and evil taking place in the world actually brings praise to God (Ex. 11:9; Numb. 14:21) by magnifying the greatness of God (Rom. 9:19) and His character of love, grace (Eph. 1:6) righteousness, justice (Rev. 15:3; 16:7) against the black backdrop of evil and sin. In every way man's wickedness will praise God. God knows how to turn the tables! His holy character shines through brightly when such terrible acts of sin are committed on earth.

The emphasis of the Bible is that God providentially controls all things and does everything “after the counsel of his own will” (Eph. 1:11). The point is this; God is accomplishing His purpose today and therefore He gets the glory for everything that happens – the good, the bad, and the ugly. He is

the One running things and moving everything according to His plan whether we like it or not.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee made this comment:

“The very wonderful thing is that God is moving this universe according to His plan and purpose. The Greeks had a proverb: ‘The dice of the gods are loaded.’ That is exactly what God is saying in this proverb (Proverbs 76:10). Whether you like it or don’t like it, God is saying to you, ‘Don’t gamble with Me. Don’t act as if I don’t exist. You can play house as if I don’t exist, as if this is your universe and you are going to work it out your way. But I want you to know that if you start gambling with Me, you will lose. You see, this is My universe, and I make the dice to come up My way, not your way. My dice are loaded—I already know how they are coming up, and you don’t.’ The thing for us to do is to get in step with God.”

b. God’s limitation of evil

Nevertheless, God does have limits on what man can do on this earth (“the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain”). God withholds certain evils from occurring according to His own plan. God is still on the throne!

2 Thessalonians 2:7

“For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth (restrains) will let (restrain), until he be taken out of the way.”

This verse clearly reveals that God does restrain evil to some degree in this world. If He would not, total chaos and anarchy would occur. The world would spin hopelessly out of control with endless evil aggression. This is what is going to take place on earth after the Rapture of the Church (Rev. 3:10). God will allow evil to climax during an end-time period known as the Tribulation Period. There will be mass murders (Rev. 20:4) and endless acts of evil aggression occurring throughout the planet.

c. God’s creation of evil

Isaiah 45:7 declares:

“I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.”

One extreme position on the sovereignty of God teaches that God is the direct creator of moral evil. Those who teach this view will use a verse such as this to arrive at their conclusion. If God is sovereign, or in control of everything that happens, then some assume that God must have also created moral evil. However, the Bible teaches that God is absolutely flawless, impeccable, and holy (Lev. 11:44; Hab. 1:13); therefore, He could never be the author of sin and evil. God is NOT directly responsible for evil coming into this world. Sin and evil acts are attributed to man (“by one man sin entered into the world” - Rom. 5:12). Man’s sinfulness is the cause of evil in the world. When God instituted the Genesis curse of judgment (Gen. 3:15-19) it was in response to what man did.

Again, this reference in Isaiah 45:7 is not referring to God directly creating moral evil; it’s referring to God providentially working with evil nations, such as the Persian kingdom, who was allowed by God to defeat the Babylonian kingdom (Isa. 45:1). This is referring to God using one nation to punish other evil nations. God knows how to do this and when to do this. God brings His purpose to pass in a fallen world of sin, as He interacts with the evil aggressors of this world.

“I ... create evil.” How then does God create evil? Think of it this way. What God permits something, He is often said to create it. This is because God is the One who is sovereign and in some measure orchestrates everything that takes place on the earth. God creates evil only in the sense that He permits evil to run its intended course, as He has ordained, and keeps His providential hand over evil actions and events in the world restraining evil to some degree.

The truth is this; although God limits evil, He allows some evil to occur for His own glory. God in His providence allows evil people and nations to express their wicked ways. While overseeing the evil that is already present in the world, God allows certain calamities, disasters, wars, and deaths to come upon certain nations and people in order to get their attention in some way and fulfill His sovereign purposes.

Amos 3:6 asks, “shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?” This is a rhetorical question where the answer is understood. Yes, God is in some sense INDIRECTLY behind every evil act that occur in the world, even such an act as committed in Newtown.

Did God DIRECTLY kill these innocent children? NO! But He ALLOWED it to happen even though He could have stopped it from occurring.

We know that God can through outward circumstances turn the hearts of evil kings (Prov. 21:1; 2 Chron. 36:22) and indirectly work with wicked people and godless nations, allowing them to fulfill His purposes in a fallen world of sin.

Romans 9:17

“For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.”

God does not create people to do evil acts but works with evil people to bring forth His personal plan on earth and demonstrate His glory.

Acts 2:23 is a case in point:

“Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.”

There can be no question about it; God is said to be in charge of evil aggression by allowing it to happen, setting the time it should happen, and limiting what can happen.

This is not only true today but will also be true during the end times.

Revelation 16:16

“And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon.”

Someday God will orchestrate the greatest evil battle that the world has ever witnessed – the Battle of Armageddon. God is not directly creating evil but neither is He ignoring it. He is orchestrating everything that occurs in the world. God allows evil aggression to occur according to His sovereign will.

As the goldfish swims in the fishbowl, so God is carrying evil to its intended goal and course. The same is true regarding evildoers and their evil acts which they commit. God is orchestrating all the events of evil to fulfill His

purpose. Since God is in control of everything that occurs He must have a purpose for even the evil actions that take place in the world.

Below are some more verses that illustrate God's sovereign control and orchestration of the events of evil over the earth.

Revelation 6:2

"And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer."

Revelation 6:3-4

"And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword."

These verses clearly reveal that God will orchestrate the events of the end times as evil aggressors and murderers such as the Antichrist have their way on the earth. The same is true today. God in some sense rules over all the evil acts of aggression that occur on planet earth. He allows it to occur according to His own timetable and for His own end and purpose.

Psalms 103:19

"The Lord hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all."

1 Chronicles 29:11

"Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all."

This is not a reference to God's millennial Kingdom. It is referring to God's macrocosmic kingdom or His universal rule over all things that take place in the universe. God rules the ages! He created the ages ("the worlds were framed by God" – Heb. 11:2) and He knows what He is doing!

If God is not orchestrating all the events of the world with His providential hand then He is no longer God. However, the Bible declares that God accomplishes whatever He wants to do on earth.

Psalm 115:3

“But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.”

Psalm 135:6

“Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places.”

God in His providence causes bad or evil things, as well as good things, to happen to people, for His own reasons, but He does not directly cause people to make morally evil decisions, nor does He tempt them to do evil actions.

James 1:13

“Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.”

God creates evil (Isaiah 45:7) only in the sense that He providentially uses the wicked people, and nations of this earth, to bring judgment and evil calamities, upon other people and nations. Furthermore, God allows evil to occur for His own purpose and glory (Ps. 76:10). This is true even when evil nations and dictators rule over others and when tragic things occur like the killing of these children and adults in Connecticut.

Although God does not DIRECTLY create evil rulers, dictators, terrorist bombings, rapists, and child killers, He has a sovereign purpose behind all of these evil actions and events. God rules over all! History is His story and what is taking place today is also His story. While using evil people and nations, God creates the boundaries of their wickedness, how far they can go, and how much they can get away with, in a fallen world (“the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain” – Ps. 76:10).

God is NOT the author of evil, but He is directly involved with all the affairs that take place on earth, even the wicked and godless actions of nations and evil men, such as the slaying of these innocent children and adults.

d. God’s orchestration of evil

We have all watched an orchestra being conducted by one man. He stands in the front and points his baton at various sections to cue them in at the right time and then another section. He is waiving His hands furiously

leading the instrumentalists and bringing together a glorious symphony. The same is true in relationship to God and the tragedy at Newtown. God is the Great Conductor bringing to pass His own symphony over the earth.

Proverbs 16:4 declares:

“The Lord hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil”.

God has in one sense made everything for Himself – even the evil actions that occur on earth. This means that God has orchestrated, like a great celestial conductor, every event that occurs on planet earth, which is designed to promote His glory.

Notice that this text does not say that God made the wicked for the day of destruction, the Lake of Fire, or damnation in hell. Hell is only prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41). The Bible is teaching that God made “all things for himself” which means to serve His own purposes and promote His own glory and praise.

Even the wicked are subservient to God’s eternal purposes! God uses the Hitler’s, Stalin’s, and serial Killers for His purposes! This verse informs us that God, in His own providential way, uses evil people and their wicked decisions and actions, represented by “the day of evil,” to fulfill His own purposes (Acts 2:23).

In other words, God allows the wicked to have their evil day in this world (“the wicked for the day of evil”), so God, through their actions, can express His own purposes and glory throughout the earth. Again, wicked people serve as a black backdrop that allows God’s righteousness to shine brightly, which in return, actually glorifies His character. Every time a wicked person reveals himself, God is praised, simply because His holiness, righteousness, and impeccability are magnified against the evil, wickedness, and sin. His own glory is one of God’s key purposes for allowing evil in the world.

Notice again that the Bible does not say God preprograms these wicked and evil people to perform these dastardly deeds. God does not create people as puppets and then make them sin (James 1:13), nor does He create people to sin (Gen. 1:31). However, God allows the course of their

sinful lives to play into His overall sovereign plan, which will ultimately bring praise to Himself. God is moving everything toward this intended goal.

Even the wicked and godless people will in some way bring praise and glory to God, both in this life, and the life to come. It may be difficult to understand and accept but even the punishment of unrepentant sinners is in keeping with God's justice ("true and righteous are thy judgments" - Rev. 16:7). Therefore, even the future punishment of sinners will in one sense glorify God's character of justice and righteousness.

Yes, the "Lord hath made all things for himself" (Prov. 16:4) which means God has in His own providence, allowed every past event, such as the Genesis Curse (Gen. 3:14-19), and every present or future event, even the judgment of lost sinners (Rev. 20:11-15), to bring glory to His name. God's justice and holiness working in judgment glorifies Him! The Lake of Fire and the suffering of sinners throughout eternity will glorify God's righteous character and justice. On the other hand, the repentance of sinners (2 Pet. 3:9) also glorifies God in showing to the world His mercy.

God is over all. God has a purpose for everything. God will always be glorified. So much for deism! God is INDIRECTLY involved in the evil actions and affairs of this life, such as the Newtown shooting, revealing the glory of His righteousness and holiness against the backdrop of sin, death, and evil. God is still on the throne even when it seems evil is running rampant in this world.

"This is my Father's world,
O let me ne'er forget that
Though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet."