ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Stephen Paddock, Las Vegas and the Nature of Evil

On the night of 1 October 2017, a gunman opened fire on a large crowd of concertgoers at the Route 91 Harvest music festival on the Las Vegas Strip, leaving 58 people dead and over 500 injured. Between 10:05 and 10:15 p.m., 64-year-old Stephen Paddock of Mesquite, Nevada, fired hundreds of rifle rounds from his suite on the 32nd floor of the nearby Mandalay Bay hotel. About an hour after Paddock fired his last shot, he was found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Why he did this is unclear.

This incident is the deadliest mass shooting committed by an individual in United States history. As expected, this horrific crime reignited the debate about gun laws in the U.S., with attention focused on bump firing, a technique Paddock used to allow his semi-automatic rifles to fire at a rate similar to that of a fully-automatic weapon. But more deeply, this act of premediated, dreadful evil raises much more profound questions: Could God have stopped this from occurring? Did He have the power and authority to prevent Paddock from committing such dastardly acts? Where was God in all this?

Of all the challenges Christians face in defending their faith, the existence of evil is one of the most formidable. We claim that God is good, yet there is suffering, pain and monstrous acts of barbarity (e.g., the Holocaust, the butchery of Joseph Stalin and the horrific persecutions in Communist China). Add to that the existence of mass murderers such as Paddock at Las Vegas, serial killers and the monotonous regularity of murder in our cities. Evil has a deep, penetrating darkness to it and, when it comes to the personal motivation of those who do evil, there is an almost impenetrable wall that defies investigation. Perhaps that is why we use terms such as "irrational, indescribable and unspeakable" when we discuss it. Philosophers and ethicists often divide evil into categories: There is "moral evil," which focuses on human acts of evil. There is "natural evil," by which we mean horrible events associated with nature—tornadoes, earthquakes and tsunamis. Finally, there is "metaphysical evil," which includes the mortality of humans, as well as their finiteness and limited power to control things. It seems that the more we study and think about evil, the more perplexing it becomes. Quite frankly, there are no easy answers. Evil poses an apparent vulnerability for Christianity, especially for biblical Christianity. Indeed, the "Four Horseman of the New Atheism"— [the late] Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett — raise the issue of evil quite powerfully and centrally in their critiques of religious belief.

So, all of this again begs the question: Where is God in all this? Such a question is rather central to the Old Testament book of Job. The emotion and apparent hopelessness evil produces are evident in many of the Psalms. And one cannot ignore the issue of evil in many of the narrative portions of both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Joseph, Daniel, and

Judas). During the European Enlightenment, the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, focused on the problem of evil in his philosophical classic of 1779, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion:* "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" As Clare Carlisle of *The Guardian* comments, "For many critics of theistic religion—and Hume can be included among them—this is not a problem to be solved, but a basic and definitive objection to belief in a creator God." But even those who embrace a secular/atheistic worldview must still explain evil. If evolution has as its core the belief that survival drives natural selection, then evil seems to be self-destructive, not self-protecting and self- preserving. In addition, the matter of evil is inextricably linked to other critical ethical issues—e.g., the meaning, purpose and value of life. Further, if there is no God, then what is the basis for ethical decision-making? If there are no absolute, transcendent standards for defining good, then perhaps defining evil is also thoroughly subjective. On what basis do we actually reach the conclusion that something is evil? The early church theologian Augustine argued that we know something is evil because we have come to know the good, which is God. Evil, he suggested, is the gross distortion of that which is good. That would certainly apply to pornography, to bestiality, to pre- and extra-marital sexual activity. Each is a gross distortion of the beautiful and good, which God defines in marriage.

Nonetheless, I believe we must go back to the Creation Ordinance of God, recorded for us in the early chapters of Genesis. In doing so, permit me to propose a framework for thinking biblically about evil. It is just that, a framework. But I believe that it is a valid starting point for thinking about evil, its origin and its resolution in Jesus Christ.

1. **PROPOSITION #1: EVIL, SUFFERING AND PAIN RESULTED FROM HUMANITY'S REJECTION OF GOD.** One of the primary themes of Scripture is that we live in a fallen world. What exactly does that mean? The Bible makes it clear that God is trinity and theologians define God as trinity in this manner: God is one essence of three persons who differ relationally (Father, Son and Spirit) and functionally (e.g., see Ephesians 1:4-14). According to 1 John 4, "God is love." Since this is a predicate nominative, this declaration says something about the character and nature of God. For all eternity, the Father has loved the Son, the Son the Father and so on (see the Gospel of John, especially 5:19-24 and chapters 14-17). Within the godhead there has always been eternal love and communion. According to Genesis 1, God made the decision to create and the crown of His creation was the creation of humanity, created in His image (see Genesis 1:26ff). At the least, bearing His image means that human beings have the capacity to not only express love and communion with one another, but more importantly with God. So, what the godhead has enjoyed for all eternity is now possible for the image-bearers of God. But are humans robots or automatons that bow down and love God at His command? Or did God create His world to be populated with image-bearers who would voluntarily love Him? For that to occur, He needed to take the risk that those humans would reject Him, which is exactly what they did (see Genesis 3 and the rest of Scripture). According to Romans 1:18-3:20, that rejection is total and complete, for it involves the rejection of His revelation in creation, conscience and moral law. And, Romans 1:18-32 details the natural results of this rejection. There we see recorded the downward spiral of self-destructive choices that result from that

rejection. Evil, then, has its origins in humanity, not God. Since God created a universe with His moral law as its foundation, there are natural consequences in rejecting that moral law. But God did not abandon His creation nor His image-bearers. He began a plan, first mentioned in Genesis 3:15, to win them back—to reconcile them to Himself.

2. **PROPOSITION #2: GOD'S SOLUTION IS THE CROSS.** God's plan was to have the second person of the Trinity, the Son, add to His deity humanity and die for rebellious image-bearers. According to the prophecies detailed in Isaiah 52 and 53, He would die for His people and God the Father would pour out His wrath upon Him. The Gospels detail the execution of God's plan, its completion at the cross and the resurrection. God paid the price of the rebellion, death, and thereby defeated the chief rebel, Satan. Christ became a victim of monstrous, horrific evil to eradicate evil from this world. In short, God's justice and His grace meet at the cross. That is how God has defeated evil and how He will vanquish evil from this planet. And He will populate the new heaven and the new earth with His image bearers who choose to place their faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, God has chosen to eliminate evil by becoming its victim and thereby, in what seemed like a defeat, was actually an astounding triumph of His grace and His compassion. Jesus did indeed "pay it all." The cross, then, is the vital center of genuine, biblical Christianity, for through it God has reconciled humanity to Himself. Those who choose to love Him do so in faith. As John says, "we love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

3. **PROPOSITION #3:** Christ's return and eternity will restore what was lost in the Fall. Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21 and 22 speak of the new heaven and new earth, the destiny of those who love God. What was lost by the human choice of rebellion will be restored when Christ returns for those who have chosen to love Him. The love and communion that the godhead has enjoyed for all eternity will now be enjoyed by all humans, created in His image and now redeemed by His grace. The fellowship and communion that the first humans knew in their walk with God will be restored.

In conclusion, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote the famous series of books on Sherlock Holmes, a series which I love to read. In his "The Adventures of the Cardboard Box," Doyle has Holmes grappling with the question of evil: "'What is the meaning of it, Watson?' said Holmes solemnly as he laid down the paper. 'What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable. But what end? There is the great standing perennial problem to which human reason is as far from an answer as ever.'" Holmes is correct, for without God's written revelation, we have no answer for evil. But through it, we understand its origin and we understand its resolution—in Jesus Christ. Jesus' death, burial and resurrection are the means by which God is destroying evil. Each human being must appropriate that finished work by faith. Once we do that, eternity and an eternal fellowship with the godhead and with one another constitute our destiny.

See Clare Carlisle in *The Guardian* (16 October 2012) and Randy Alcorn, *If God is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil*, pp. 47-94.