

Why do bad things happen? (KS3, KS4 & KS5)

A number of students have contacted me recently, asking for a perspective on “The Problem of Evil”. It’s one of the classic theological questions, albeit one that is not as applicable to Paganism as it is to other religions, owing to our different perspectives on the divine. However, the subject did set my mind onto what I think is the crux of that classic question – not so much “evil” as “bad things”. So that’s what I’ll be talking about in this entry: Why do bad things happen?

It’s first important to consider what we mean by bad things. After all, “bad” is definitely a spectrum. Stubbing your toe can be seen as a bad thing, but it’s hardly on the level of a natural disaster, like a hurricane, earthquake or, indeed, a pandemic. Very different ends of the scale and we really can’t lump all the things that we might consider to be bad, into one box with one reason.

The reason for stubbing your toe is probably because you weren’t paying enough attention to where you were walking. Which is an indirect way of saying that sometimes, frankly, it really is our own fault that bad things happen and we’ve no one and nothing to blame but ourselves.

But then there are the things that are out of our control. The bad things to which we have no choice but to suffer, regardless of the choices we make.

A fair few Pagans ascribe to the concept of Karma – or at least, some Westernised version of it. Basically, some idea that the universe has some kind of self-righting mechanism for dealing with good and bad deeds/people. Personally, I don’t find that view to be overly convincing. However I have to mention it, as it is a prominent belief among many Pagans.

I would prefer to begin by distinguishing between natural and human calamity. Natural events that we may perceive as “bad” are generally only bad to us. But nature has no motivation, it simply is. It is not doing bad to us, nature just functions and we are a part of it, both for the things that benefit us and the misfortunes that befall us. A lion may kill a gazelle, which is undoubtedly bad for the gazelle, but it is good for the lion. The lion is not bad, evil, or some instrument of cosmic justice that has come to punish the gazelle. It is just nature. Similarly, if some aspect of nature is bad for us, it’s not personal.

“But surely,” some might say, “the Gods could step in and protect us from these tragedies?” I imagine that they could. In fact, I feel safe in saying that the Gods are willing to intercede in our lives, at their discretion. But this is where the Pagan view of the divine often differs from that of other faiths. For Pagans, the Gods are intrinsically interwoven with nature. The character, essence, being, identity, of the Gods is present within nature. The Gods are not separate from the natural world. Rather, they are a part of it.

Different Pagans may interpret this in different ways (just like most things in Paganism). On one end of the spectrum, some Pagans may have an animistic view of the divine, while at the other end of the spectrum are Pagans who see the divine in a hard polytheist way. But even the staunchest polytheist is unlikely to argue with the notion that the Gods and nature are intimately connected.

So, while we may suffer and ask why the Gods do not circumvent nature for our benefit, such a question is really no different than the gazelle asking why it is that the lion must eat it.

Really, wondering why such things happen to us, is an extension of the same age-old human hubris that tries to place us at the centre of the universe, with everything revolving around us. As if the universe were created especially for us. We tend to imagine ourselves as more important than other animals, the Earth as our own personal property, and her resources as there for us to use as we wish. But nature is blind to our delusions of grandeur.

Similarly, nature has no agenda for human suffering or reward.

Then there are those bad things that are entirely of human origin. Bad people doing bad things – especially to other people.

Sometimes people get what's coming to them and pay the price for the terrible things they do. Sometimes. But too often, the guilty walk free and face no consequences to their actions. They may even benefit from their bad deeds. When this happens we say "where is the justice?" and ask "how can this be allowed to happen?"

As one might expect, when human institutions and systems fail to deliver the justice we crave, many turn their attentions to a higher power, either begging for some kind of intervention or instead asking why this injustice has been allowed to happen.

This is where the classic "Question of Evil" comes in. The question being:

If God is all-powerful and all-good, then why is there evil? If he can put a stop to evil, but chooses to allow evil, he cannot be all-good. If he cannot put a stop to evil, then he is not all-powerful.

Some religions turn to free will, as the reason why such injustice is allowed to exist. The suggestion being that to remove free will, whether for good or evil, would in itself be an evil act. Others turn to the afterlife as the final justice, where good and bad people are rewarded and punished.

Now, it's not that Paganism doesn't have such concepts as free will and the afterlife, but the actual "question of evil" is of less relevance to us. This is primarily because we do not have any texts or dogmas that require us to see our Gods as all-powerful or all-good. Of course, some might see the divine that way – and that's fine – but they are not required to.

Generally speaking, I think that it is fair to say that the Gods are seen as being good. However, as previously mentioned, they are also seen as existing within nature, rather than apart from it. So, in this regard, we don't tend to envisage the Gods as all-powerful beings that are beyond time and space, and capable of doing absolutely anything that can be imagined. Rather, it's probably better to say that the Gods have their own characters. Whatever that means.

Seriously: whatever that means. Because to some Pagans that will mean that each God has a unique identity and is fully autonomous, but with their own domain of influence. (That would be the hard polytheists that I mentioned, before). Other Pagans might see each "God" as merely an expression of the greater and unknowable divine, which we have filtered into manageable characters that our human minds can relate to and comprehend. Other Pagans would likely land somewhere between these two beliefs.

(Then there are Pagans who are atheists).

So where are these Pagan Gods when mankind faces travesties of justice? Where are they when wicked people do cruel things? Do the Gods not care?

In my experience, I'd say that they care. They care about people. But they have little concern for human ideas of justice. I can only speak for myself here, but it seems to me that when the Gods intervene in the life of a person (or people) they more often take the role of teachers and guides, who help humanity to be better. Not stepping in as a punishing force for the guilty, but as a guiding influence for those that can do better.

However, still speaking solely for myself, I also think that even this view is subject to human failing. I think that people understand the Gods only in small glimpses and those glimpses are made through the lens of human frailty, expectation, desire, and need. As such, we are prone to misunderstanding the Gods. So, they show us what we need to see, within the limits of what we can currently understand. As such, our understanding of the Gods changes and evolves, as humanity grows.

I feel like I've wandered off of the topic of bad things and why they happen. But that question only exists because the idea of the divine has been added to the mix. Without the concept of something like a God, Karma, etc. we would simply resolve ourselves to the fact that life and the universe are not fair, and that's just the way it is.

And it's true. That is the way it is. At least, from a human perspective.

But because we can conceive of something bigger than the human perspective – because we believe we've in some way experienced it – we ask bigger questions. We try to find the truth of our place in the universe and of the things that we go through, both good and bad.

This resource was written by Luthaneal Adams, one of RE:ONLINE's Email a Believer team. If your class would like to ask a Pagan representative any questions about their beliefs, or to see answers to previously asked questions please visit <http://pof.reonline.org.uk/people-of-faith/paganism/>