

What Does the Bible Teach About Why Bad Things Happen to Good People?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. When something bad or painful happens in our lives, many ask, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this? After all, I am a good person and I prayed to God, why weren't my prayers answered?"
 - 1. These questions can become more troubling to us than the problem.
 - 2. We heap guilt on ourselves, or else won't let go of feeling like a victim.
 - 3. We often hope for too much, setting ourselves up for disappointment.
 - 4. We hinder ourselves from accepting and adapting to the present.
 - 5. Human beings are engineered by God to adapt to hardship. We can learn to live with many problems.
- B. A young woman of 23 was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a radical mastectomy. Her post-surgical treatment included therapy to deal with removal of muscle tissue. She originally thought her life was slated for loneliness, and certainly did not expect that she and her therapist would fall in love, marry, and start a family. Out of adversity sprouted a different life.

I. WHY DO THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER?

- A. It is tempting at one level to believe that bad things happen to people (especially other people) because God is a righteous judge who gives them what they deserve in this life. By believing that, we keep the world orderly and understandable. We need this in order to feel secure.
- B. We sometimes reason blindly when bad things happen by thinking:
 - 1. Someone must have made a mistake or failed in observing some religious duty.
 - 2. God has a hidden purpose for us, or is using knowledge we don't have.
 - 3. Suffering itself will turn out to be good for us.
 - 4. God's purpose is in the grand design of the Universe (which is good and beautiful), not in the life of the individual. Borderline deism
 - 5. Suffering teaches something, either to us or to those who observe it.
 - 6. Suffering is a test.
 - 7. Death leads us and our loved ones to a better place.
- C. But sometimes, we just suffer for no apparent reason! We may never know why. And that is the true test of our confidence and faith in God.
- D. Pointless suffering is hard to bear. But suffering as a contribution to a great design of God Himself may be seen, not only as a tolerable burden, but even as a privilege.
 - 1. "Tell me not why I must suffer. Assure me only that I suffer for Thy sake." (The prayer of a medieval martyr)

II. SUFFERING CAN BE EDUCATIONAL

- A. "Suffering comes to ennoble man, to purge his thoughts of pride and superficiality, to expand his horizons. In sum, the purpose of suffering is to repair that which is faulty in a man's personality." (Joseph Soloveitchik)

1. Just as a parent has to punish a child whom he loves for the child's sake, so God has to correct us. A parent who pulls his or her child out of a busy roadway, or refuses to give him a candy bar before supper, is not being mean or unfair. He or she is just being a concerned, responsible parent - Heb. 12:5-11

III. THE RIGHTEOUS ARE NOT EXEMPT FROM SUFFERING

- A. One of the ways in which people have tried to make sense of suffering has been to assume we deserve what we get, that somehow all of our misfortunes come as punishment for our sins.
 - 1. Isa. 3:10-11; Gen. 38:7; Prov. 12:21; Job 4:7
 - 2. We often misunderstand these texts as did Job's three counselors.

IV. THE STORY OF JOB

A. Summary: Job was a fortunate and pious man. Satan charges that Job is pious only because he is fortunate. To prove a point, God lets Satan take away all that Job has, including his children, and to cover his body with boils. Three friends come to visit Job, and their conversations are the bulk of the book. Job complains that his suffering is an injustice from God. His friends defend the idea that God is just with a variety of arguments, including that Job must have done something to deserve his suffering. Job declares his innocence and challenges God to be his accuser. God appears in a whirlwind and points out that He and Job are not equals. Job is silenced. God then reproves Job's friends and restores Job's health and fortune.

- B. We would like to believe that:
 - 1. God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens in the world. Nothing happens unless He wills it.
 - 2. God is just and fair, and stands for people getting what they deserve, so that the good only prosper and only the wicked are punished.
 - 3. Job is a good person.
- C. As long as Job is healthy and wealthy, we can believe all three of those statements at the same time with no difficulty. When Job suffers, we have a problem. We can no longer make sense of all three propositions together. We can now affirm any two only by denying the third.
 - 1. If God is both just and powerful, then Job must be a sinner who deserves what is happening to him.
 - 2. If Job is good but God causes his suffering, then God is not just.
 - 3. If Job deserved better and God did not cause his suffering, then God is not all-powerful.
- D. Job's friends do not believe that Job is a good person.
 - 1. Job questions God's goodness.
 - 2. Elihu had the right answer - Job 37:14-24
- E. Answer: Job is a good man, but God is not limited by human definitions of fairness and justice. He is infinite and all wise; we are limited and ignorant.

V. SOMETIMES THERE IS NO REASON WE UNDERSTAND

- A. Can you accept the idea that there is randomness in the universe?

1. God created all things by miracle and sustains it by law. The laws of nature contain the principle of randomness.
2. An engine bolt breaks on flight 205 instead of on flight 209, inflicting tragedy on one group of families rather than another. There is no reason for those particular people to be afflicted rather than others. God's order in this universe includes the rain falling on the just and the unjust. However, because tragedies happen at random, and people expect God to personally control every facet of their lives, it leads many to doubt God's goodness. This is Calvinism and Augustinianism, not truth.

VI. THERE ARE NO EXCEPTIONS FOR GOOD PEOPLE

- A. People find reassuring proof of God in stories of miracles. God cared about them so much that He was willing to suspend the laws of nature to support and protect those whom He favored. We want God to do the same for us.
 1. God's laws of nature do not make exceptions for nice people. A bullet has no conscience; neither does a malignant tumor or an automobile out of control. That is why good people get sick and get hurt as much as anyone. God does not reach down to suspend His laws of nature to protect the righteous from harm, simply because they ask.
 2. Did He rescue Jesus from the cross? Did He save the apostles from martyrdom? What makes us think He will make an exception for us?
 3. God suspended His laws of nature only when He had a purpose.
 4. Are the righteous from years gone by still with us?
 5. All men die (Heb. 9:27); sooner or later that is the price we will pay for sin. The greater question is have we trusted God enough to obey Him?
- B. Therefore, the earthquake is not an "act of God." The act of God is in the courage He gives His people to rebuild their lives after the earthquake, and in the rush of others to help them in whatever way they can.
 1. 1Cor. 10:13 - God did not promise to take away our troubles and temptations; He promised to give us the power to handle them.
 2. "Pain is the price we pay for being alive. When we understand that, our question will change from, 'why do we have to be in pain?' to 'what do we do with our pain so that it becomes meaningful and is not just pointless empty suffering? How can we turn all the painful experiences of our lives into growing pains?' We may not ever understand why we suffer or be able to control the forces that cause our suffering, but we can have a lot to say about what the suffering does to us, and what sort of people we become because of it. Pain makes some people bitter and envious. It makes others sensitive and compassionate. It is the result, not the cause, of pain that makes some suffering meaningful and others empty and destructive." (Harold Kushner)

VII. GOD ALLOWS US TO MAKE CHOICES, SOMETIMES TO OUR DETRIMENT

- A. If humankind is truly free to choose, if he can show himself as being virtuous by freely choosing the good when the bad is equally possible, then he must be free to choose the bad also.
 1. Being a free moral agent leaves us free to hurt each other; God cannot stop us without taking away His gift of freedom to choose good or evil

2. Human beings cheat each other, rob each other, hurt each other; God can only look down in pity and compassion at how little we have learned
3. When people ask "Where was God in Auschwitz? How could he have allowed the Nazis to kill so many innocent men, women, and children?" The answer is that it was not God who caused it. It was caused by human beings choosing to be cruel to their fellow men.

VIII. SOME NEED TO STOP HURTING THEMSELVES AND LET GOD HELP THEM

- A. Too often, in our pain and confusion, we do the wrong thing. We don't feel we deserve to be helped, so we let guilt, anger, jealousy, and self-imposed loneliness make a bad situation even worse.
- B. It is hard to know what to say to a person who has been struck by tragedy, but it is easier to know what not to say.
 1. Anything critical of the mourner ('don't take it so hard,' 'try to hold back your tears, you're upsetting people') is wrong. Anything which tries to minimize the mourner's pain ('it's probably for the best,' 'it could be a lot worse,' 'she's better off now') is likely to be misguided and unappreciated. Anything which asks the mourner to disguise or reject his feelings ('we have no right to question God,' 'God must love you to have selected you for this burden') is wrong as well.
 2. Job's friends did do at least two things right, though. First, they came. And second, they listened silently. It was when they opened their mouths and tried to tell him why he suffered that they got into trouble.
- C. What do we do with our anger when we have been hurt? The goal, if we can achieve it, would be to be angry at the situation, rather than at ourselves, or at those who might have prevented it, or are close to us trying to help us, or at God who let it happen.
 1. Getting angry at ourselves makes us depressed.
 2. Being angry at other people scares them away and makes it harder for them to help us. Staying home from church is not the answer. It makes the matter worse.
 3. Being angry at God erects a barrier between us and all the sustaining, comforting resources He has given to help us during difficult times.

IX. GOD SOMETIMES ANSWERS PRAYER WITH "NO" OR "NOT NOW"

- A. If prayer worked the way many people think it should, no one would ever die.
- B. Reasons people give for why others might not get what they pray for:
 1. You didn't deserve it.
 2. You didn't pray hard enough.
 3. God is angry with you.
 4. Someone more worthy was praying for the opposite result.
 5. You prayed incorrectly
 6. Prayed that God change what already is (the sex of a baby)
 7. Prayed that God change the laws of nature.
 8. You prayed that someone else be harmed.
 9. You prayed that God would do something within your power, so that you don't have to do it.

- C. How about... God is all wise and all knowing, and I am limited and ignorant?
 - 1. How about... God, who is wise, simply said 'No'?
 - 2. How about... trusting God, and asking for things He will give?
- D. What things should I pray for in adversity?
 - 1. Fellowship and support from saints - Gal. 6:2
 - 2. Strength of character to deal with adversity. People who pray for miracles don't get miracles. But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they lost, often find their prayers answered.

X. APPLICATIONS

A. When we try to deal with trials alone, we find out that we are not strong. We are weak; we get tired, we get angry, overwhelmed. We begin to wonder how we will ever make it through all the years. But when we reach the limits of our own strength and courage, we find reinforcement coming from sources outside ourselves. And in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God and His saints are on our side, we manage to persevere. The burden remains while we are in this world, but God enables us to bear it until we join Him in heaven where all burdens are laid down.

B. Some suggestions on preparing your mind to deal with hardship:

- 1. Keep the problem in perspective. Let the obstacle take a back seat. You have a problem; you are not the problem; you are not a problem.
- 2. Focus on the present; concentrate on living a meaningful life. Don't dwell on past or future loss. We all come into this world with nothing and we leave with nothing.
- 3. Stop fussing over details. Save your energy for the problem.
- 4. Do something new. Take up a new craft or hobby, make a new friend, take a class, go somewhere you have never been.
- 5. Pray with other people; pray for them, not just yourself. Get your attention off of yourself on onto others.
- 6. Keep your hopes realistic: Hope to sleep better, feel more energetic, see friends, go on an outing with the family. Hoping for a miracle will lead to disappointment
- 7. Cultivate humor. You can lessen the severity of a problem by laughing at it. Humor generates a pleasant frame of mind and hormones that have healthy effects.
- 8. Worry less about why bad things happen and concentrate more on making the most of your life on earth. No matter how hard we think and rationalize, we might never understand why, but we can learn to appreciate what we have.
- 9. Be kind to others because it will make you feel better knowing that you still have the power to contribute. Don't look to get anything in return.
- 10. Ease up your grip on trying to control things. When you yield to the problem or condition and accept it, you will have more energy to heal.
- 11. Clean up your home and create a space that is inviting to others. This will attract positive people into your life to support and sustain you.
- 12. Trust God.