

“Why Bad Things Happen to Good People”



God's Word on Suffering and Calamity

Why Bad Things Happen to Good People

Text: Job 13.24-14.2

Introduction

We live in a world full of suffering, pain, and sorrow... When tragedy comes, the agonized cry of the soul is "Why...?"

The parents of an extremely bright and active eight-year-old girl noticed one morning that she seemed unusually tired. Later they became aware that her ankles were swollen so they took her to the doctor. The diagnosis: acute leukemia. Eighteen months and ten days later, she was dead. And her parents cried. "God, why did you take our baby?"

A young housewife noticed that she was getting tired easily. Then one night she stumbled over the threshold of her front door. The next day she went to the doctor. The diagnosis: multiple sclerosis. She was told that she would find it progressively harder to walk; eventually she would become an invalid until she died. Upon hearing the news she broke down and cried: "God, why did you let this happen to me? I have a husband and young children who need me. I have tried to be a good person. I don't deserve this."

Job was a blameless and upright man, a man who feared God. He had been greatly blessed by God with great wealth, ten children, excellent health, and the love and esteem of his neighbors. Suddenly, through an incredible series of events Job lost everything--wealth, children, respect! His anguished cry was, "Why?" "Why was I ever born?" (Job 3.11-19.) "Why didn't God take my life when everything else was taken from me...?" (Job 3.20-26.) "Why has God turned away from me..?" (Job 9.13-24.)

Why do bad things happen to good people...?

That is one of the most puzzling of all human problems. Maybe it is the hardest question of life. Why must people suffer...? Why must there be heartache and disappointment...? Why must there be disease and death...? Why does tragedy invade the lives of those who sincerely try to serve God...? How is it that a God who loves us so much would allow suffering to come into our homes...? We want to turn to the scriptures for help in wrestling with the question of Why Bad Things Happen To Good People...

I. Some Faulty and Incomplete Explanations for the Presence of Suffering

Many answers have been given in an attempt to explain the problem of human suffering. Many of these answers are very wrong. The Book of Job illustrates this very plainly. Job's wife, his friends, and his acquaintances grappled with the question of why Job was suffering. They had plausible sounding, glib answers; but they were wrong! Look at the answers they gave to account for Job's suffering. ¹

1. "God has sent it"

This was the answer Job's wife gave. She felt that God was causing Job's agony and so she urged: "Curse God and die." (Job 2.9.) People often accept the same explanation for suffering today: "God took my loved one!" "It is God's will" for some tragedy to occur. Natural calamities are called "acts of God." But it is absolutely false to say that all suffering is sent by God!!! Job's sorrows were not inflicted by God but by Satan! It is most emphatically not true that God is responsible for all suffering!

2. "God is punishing you."

This was the response of Job's three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. They were not bad men. They meant well but were tragically mistaken. They argued that all suffering is the direct and sure result of sin. "Whoever perished being innocent?" they asked. (Job 4.7.) They counseled Job to admit that he had sinned and that he deserved what was happening to him! Now, there is sometimes an element of truth in this explanation. **Sometimes we do suffer because of sins.** Paul told the Corinthians that many of them were weak, sickly, and dying because of their sinful abuse of the Lord's Supper. (1 Corinthians 11.30.) David sinned and as a result his baby son died. (2 Samuel 12.13-14.) Sometimes people do suffer for their sins but we make a grave mistake when we assume that all suffering is the result of sin. When Jesus died on the cross two men died with Him, suffering for their sin. But Jesus did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth. He suffered in innocence. Many people do today. Jesus once healed a man born blind and when asked whose sin was responsible for the man's blindness, He said: "Neither this man sinned, nor his parents, hut... that the works of God might he displayed in him..." (John 9.3.) Innocent people suffer without having deserved it!

3. "God is trying to tell you something."

This was the explanation given by a young man named Elihu for Job's trouble. He was impatient with Job and his three friends because they couldn't see what he thought were obvious. "God is trying to teach you a lesson," he said. "*Man is chastened with pain.*" (Job 33.19.) This is sometimes true. God taught Paul humility by refusing to take away his "*thorn in the flesh.*" (2 Corinthians 12.7-9.) But it was not the total answer. It did not apply in the case of Job. It does not always apply today!

II. Why Does God Allow His Children to Suffer?

The Bible gives several insights into this question. ²

1. *Some suffering is built into the universe.*

God made this world in a certain way and in a sense suffering is woven into its very fabric. God has natural laws, which order and maintain our world. Powerful forces are unleashed by the working of these laws. We can get caught in the machinery that drives the universe. If we get in the way of God's natural laws we can get hurt: floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc. Jesus said, "*The wind blows and no man knows where it listeth.*" The way the universe is built allows for some suffering to happen.

2. *Some suffering is self-inflicted.*

God has both spiritual as well as natural laws. When those laws are violated, we suffer the consequences. God made man a creature with freedom of choice. We can choose evil or we can choose good. We can make mistakes, blunders, and wrong choices. And we suffer for it. We speak of breaking God's laws; but actually we don't break God's laws; we disregard God's laws (natural or spiritual) and they break us! We don't "break" the law of gravity by jumping from a huge skyscraper; we disregard it and suffer the consequences!

3. *Some suffering is passed on from others.*

Sometimes our suffering is the result of choices and actions of other people. Other people can misuse their freedom of will in such a way that it harms us! "We have met the enemy is he is us." It is men who riot and rape and kill and lie.. who make guns and grenades and bayonets.. Men like Herod or Hitler can plunge a whole nation or a whole world into suffering. Because God did not make us senseless robots, but men and

women capable of choosing good or evil, we will go on hurting others and being hurt by them.

4. *Some suffering represents the rage of Satan.*

It was Satan who afflicted Job! Paul calls his thorn in the flesh a "messenger of Satan." (2 Cor. 12.7.) The Bible speaks of Satan causing disease (Luke 13.16,) and having the power of death. (Hebrews 2.14.) It was Satan who trashed God's creation by unleashing sin, disease and death on the world. Let's never lose sight of this. Satan hates those who seek to do right and will do all in his power to hinder and oppress them. Suffering and calamity may be in indication that you are on the right track and Satan is trying to derail you!

5. *Some suffering is educational.*

(See James 1.2-3; Romans 5.3-5.) Suffering confers spiritual insight; it can teach us patience and can build character and strength. It can prepare us for greater service. It can knock a lot of nonsense out of us! Illness, for example, may lead us to see things in a clearer light than we ever did when we were going through life without a care! Troubles are the tools that God uses to fashion us for better things.

6. *Some suffering is therapeutic.*

It may make us better people; it may lead us to repentance; it may discipline us spiritually. "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes." (Psalm 119.71; see Hebrews 12.6-11.) God may permit suffering for the sake of our spiritual health and well-being!

Suffering may arise from a variety of different causes--perhaps from a combination of causes or from causes we cannot even understand. (Job was never really given an explanation for his suffering!) We cannot easily look at any experience of suffering and put our finger on the "why" of it!!! But in a sense why is the wrong question! There is so much we do not know. Suffering is beyond our fullest comprehension. We need to turn to another question that is far more important!

III. How Should We React to Suffering in Our Lives?

1. *We must remember that the important thing is not "why" suffering comes, but "how" we meet it!*³

Suffering can make us bitter or better. It will do one of the two. It is up to us! The real question is not "what's behind my suffering?" but "what's in me?" You can use suffering as a tool for improving your life or as an excuse for getting mad at God! A missionary and his wife in Pakistan had a six-month-old baby who became ill with a mysterious fever and died in a single day. A wise man told them: "A tragedy like this is like being plunged into boiling water. If you are an egg, your affliction will make you hard boiled and unresponsive; if you are a potato, you will emerge soft and pliable, and useable." We need to learn to pray when suffering comes, "Oh, Lord, let me be a potato."

2. *We must remember that suffering does not defeat or thwart the purposes of God.* Hold on to **Romans 8.28** - "*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*" Tragedy, disaster, sorrow, and calamity do not frustrate God's purposes. Our problem is that we look at things from the wrong side. My wife does counted cross stitch designs. If you look at the work from the bottom it seems to be only a tangled mass of threads but on top a beautiful design is being worked out in intricate pattern. God did not send Paul's "thorn in the flesh"--Satan did; but God used it for Paul's good! Paul was a better man because of it. No matter what happens, God can arrange matters so that it fits into His pattern!

The poet has said:

My life is but a weaving
Between my Lord and me,
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.

Oftimes he weaveth sorrows,
And I in foolish pride
Forget he sees the upper
And I the underside.

Nor till the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Shall God unroll the canvas
And explain the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful

In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.

2. *We must remember to trust God and rely on Him whatever comes!*
We do not understand all that happens. We do not have all the facts. Our vision is limited; we see from an earthly vantage point instead of from eternity. We must, therefore, trust in the wisdom, power, and love of God! This is the message of the Book of Job! God didn't tell Job "why"! He said "trust me!"

A farmer watched a mocking bird building her nest in a heap of branches pruned from the apple tree beside the house. All day long the bird toiled; in the evening the farmer destroyed the work she had done--scattering tiny twigs about and trampling them under his feet. The next day the bird patiently began building again. Again at evening time her work was destroyed. Judged by bird standards, the man was cruel. The third day she began her nest again, but this time in the rose bush by the kitchen door. In the evening, the farmer smiled on the bird and her work remained. Day after day she continued to build; the nest was completed; the eggs were laid and warmed beneath her bosom. But long before the time for hatching, the pile of branches from which she had been driven had been removed and burned. Had the far seeing farmer allowed the bird to have her way, all of her nest, her little ones, and her hope for the season would have been destroyed. She did not see beyond one day. He saw the end from the beginning. ⁴

Since God knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46.10,) we can trust Him in all things--even those which we cannot understand! Jesus said something in a different connection which also applies very well in this connection: "*What I do thou knowest not now but thou shalt know hereafter.*" (John 13.7.)

Conclusion

In this life we "*do groan, being troubled...*" (2 Cor. 5.4.) But we believe that there is a better land--a land where suffering and sorrow are unknown. God has prepared a home for us there and to that home He wishes us to come. Were it not for the heartaches, disappointments and sufferings of this world, we might forget the greater destiny that lies before us. Perhaps the sufferings of this world were designed, in part, to cause us not to be satisfied here, but to lift our eyes toward that world to come where

"He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more." (Rev. 21.4.)

Those who have this hope, need never fear tomorrow! Is this hope yours...?
It Can Be!

ENDNOTES

1. cf. Thos. LConstable, "When God's Silence Is Deafening," Kindred Spirit, (Dallas Theological Seminary), Summer 1980, pp. 14-16.
2. cf. Batsell Barrett Baxter, Great Preachers of Today, "The Problem of Human Suffering," pp. 206-216, and Jack Exum, Winning Over Suffering, (tract).
3. cf. Harold S. Kushner, "Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People?," Reader's Digest, January 1983, pp. 143-146.
4. Julian Goodpaster, "Trusting God," Family Matters, March 24, 1983, p. 2.