

When Bad Things Happen To Good People September 20, 2006

*It was pain that knocked upon my door
And said that she had come to stay.
Though I would not welcome her but bade her go away,
She entered in.
And like my own shade
She followed after me.
And from her stabbing, stinging sword,
No moment was I free.*

You may recognize the title—it's borrowed from Rabbi Harold S. Kushner's book by the same name. In his opening chapter entitled, "Why Do The Righteous Suffer," he says:

"There is only one question that really matters: why do bad things happen to good people? All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting. The misfortunes of good people are not only a problem to the people who suffer and to their families. They are a problem to everyone who wants to believe in a just and fair God."

Philip Yancey has also written a very fine book dealing with the topic, entitled, *Where Is God When It Hurts*, as has C.S. Lewis in a book entitled, *The Problem Of Pain*, which I've loaned to someone and can't remember who...I'd love to have it back.

I'd like to read some excerpts from one of my most highly valued books, *When Heaven Is Silent*, written by my very good friend, esteemed colleague, personal mentor for many, many years, and most trusted confidant whose death a few years ago brought me a deeper grief than I know yet how to process... (read from pages 59-62).

I remember the night the seeds for that book took root—they'd already been planted through the years of unimaginable struggle that Ron and Kaye had been through—but the night he decided to write the book he and I were together at a Bible conference, and we'd heard some things taught and promised that were so incredibly unfair to hurting people, so completely dishonest in regard to the human situation, and so comprehensively misrepresentative of responsible biblical scholarship that he decided the time had come. I'm glad he wrote it, even though for doing so he himself was written off by many for what they perceived as a *lacking faith* approach to life.

When we think about pain and suffering, most of the time we think about how to avoid them, and I think to do otherwise is impossible. Who wants to suffer? Who wants to hurt? Who wants to face down gigantic doubts?

But face them we will...at some time, and in some measure...

James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,
³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

The first people to read these ancient words were Jewish Christians, and they were hated by everyone around them. They were hated by the Romans because they were Jewish, and they were hated by their fellow Jews because they were Christians.

It was an era when being a Christian was not in vogue. Roman law allowed that henchmen could track you down, beat you, incarcerate you, and confiscate everything you owned.

- They knew what suffering meant as well as the hounding, relentless pain that often follows.
- They had become as despised as the leper, and not much better off.

When bad things happen to good people God's timeless message to them is his timely message to us.

Bad Things Do Happen to Good People & Most of Us Would Like to Know Why.

- Sometimes these bad things leave scars, some of which are visible and some of which aren't—those that are too deep for others to see.
- Sometimes they're too personal to talk about, too unbelievable to ask others to understand, and far too hard to explain.
- Some of us know this all too well I suspect...and we've probably been tempted to ask...
 - "Why?"
 - You aren't alone in asking...
 - And you aren't alone in that, when we're really, really honest, we find few, if any, satisfactory answers to our question.

Ron's take on it is the reason we don't get an answer is because we're asking the wrong question.

- The question that mortals must ask of an omnipotent God isn't *why*.
 - By simple virtue of him being God he owes us no explanation.
 - No amount of pressure or threatening or angry outbursts will change him, because he can't change.
 - He can't do things differently than he does them because he always bases his actions on that which will bring the highest amount of good to the greatest number of people for the longest period of time; he always does what's right, and he does it so perfectly right that not only is there not a better way to do it, a better way to do it cannot be imagined. (Tozer)

- Ask *why* all you want, if you want—I don't think God will begrudge you the experience—but you won't get an answer that will satisfy you.
- The question we need to ask is *what*.
 - What is the most redemptive response that a person who believes in the absolute holiness and goodness of an all-knowing, all-powerful God can make?
 - And that's a hard question to ask when all we really want is an explanation—here's an option to consider...
 - Doing what's right just because it's right...

QUOTE

“The highest goodness asks for no reward save that of knowing that it is doing God's will. It is really self-evident that if acts are to be truly virtuous, rewards and pain must not be obviously proportioned to deserts. To do right solely because it is right would scarcely be possible if the act were at once rewarded and the choice never costly.”¹

Bad Things Are Not a Sign Of God's Displeasure.

Job 1:8; 13-19; 2:3-9

Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.”

¹³One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, ¹⁴a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, ¹⁵and the Sabeans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

¹⁶While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, “The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

¹⁷ While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, “The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

¹⁸ While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, “Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, ¹⁹when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

^{2:3}Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason.”

¹ John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1974), p. 73.

⁴“Skin for skin” Satan replied. “A man will give all he has for his own life. ⁵But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.”

⁶The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.”

⁷So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. ⁸Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes.

⁹His wife said to him, “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!”

QUOTE

*No one deserved to suffer less—but none ever suffered more than Job.*²

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you heard or read the saying, *God tempers the wind toward the shorn lamb*? Do you believe he does?
2. In Philip Yancey’s book, *Where Is God When It Hurts*, he asks:

“How does God fit into this world he has made for us? Does he hover close above us, reaching in now and then to break an arm, cause a tragic death, unleash a flood? Or does he silently let the world slump along with its wars, tragedies, and violent history?”

“...I doubt the view that God directly causes suffering to teach us specific lessons. He allows suffering to exist, and as his megaphone it can serve moral ends. But I can’t believe he actively inflicts pain for a specific purpose.”³

When bad things happen, in your opinion, who did it? God? Fate? Satan?

3. God controls everything ultimately—is it fair for us to suppose that there is an important distinction between God causing people to suffer and God allowing the suffering in order to authenticate the faith of his followers?
4. During seasons of trial and testing does your past behavior indicate that that you’re interest lies more in the realm of *why* is this happening to me or in the realm of *what* is the response of authentic faith?

² Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1977) p. 71.

³ Yancey, pp. 64, 66-67.

Good & Bad Aren't So Easily Distinguished.

I don't want this to sound like some tired and worn attempt to rescue God's honor from the trash bin of popular opinion, but the fact is sometimes good and bad are hard to tell apart until the last chapter is over.

- Think about the good things and the bad things that happened to Joseph...
 - Thrown in a pit and left for dead by his own brothers (bad)...
 - Rescued by the same brothers (good)...
 - Only to be sold as a slave (bad)...
 - Given a good job by a wealthy family (good)...
 - But falsely accused of attempted rape by the boss's wife (bad)...
 - Arrested and unjustly imprisoned (bad)...
- He waited several years to formulate his conclusion—when he did this is where he landed—and I highly recommend that you remember this...

Genesis 45:4-8; 50:18-20

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. ⁷But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

⁸"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God."

^{50:18}His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

The Issue is Purpose—Not Power.

His name is Yahweh—not Aladdin. My wish is not his command. His concern must always be accomplishing the highest good for the greatest number for the longest time—and no prayer I ever pray will cause him to behave differently.

It's never a question of, *does God have the power?* That's where Rabbi Kushner and I disagree. The Rabbi makes sense of his 14-year-old son's death from progeria by deciding that, for a variety of reasons, God can't do everything he'd like to do for us. If God could have saved his son, then the Rabbi concludes that he would have. Since he didn't, it must be the case that he couldn't, that it was beyond the power of God to prevent his son from having progeria, to heal him once he had it, or to allow the scientists to discover a treatment for it. Otherwise, says the Rabbi, he isn't a God worthy of our love and devotion.

I can get pretty close to understanding his argument if I can introduce my own understanding of God's limitations, which means that God is limited only in the sense that he cannot do any one thing that is contrary to any other thing he does. But at the

end of the day I have to disagree with any notion that restricts the ability of God to do anything based on his lack of power.

Where power and purpose collide, it seems to me that God's purposes always have to come first.

His Purposes are Often Beyond My Ability to Comprehend.

Isaiah 55:9

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Romans 11:33

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!

- If I only knew why...
- But if I did, only arrogance makes me think I would understand it.
- And if I did understand it, only ignorance makes me think I'd be satisfied with it.
 - This much I know from experience...
 - Even with the glory of God at stake, and the immutable, omni-sapient God in control, I am not convinced that it's been necessary for my wife to suffer as she has for the last 25 years.
 - Whatever he's been up to, it seems to me, could have been accomplished without her having to give up a large part of the life she used to enjoy and endure such incredible pain that, at times, I've wondered if she would survive it.
 - I cooperate with it, but I've never made friends with it and don't know if it's within me to ever do so in this lifetime.

Bottom Line—It's a Faith Thing.

Hebrews 11:17-40

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ¹⁹Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

²⁰By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

²¹By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

²²By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.

²³By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

²⁴By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. ²⁶He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he

was looking ahead to his reward. ²⁷By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. ²⁸By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

²⁹By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.

³¹By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

³²And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵Women received back their dead, raised to life again. **Others** were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. ³⁶**Some** faced jeers and flogging, while still **others** were chained and put in prison. ³⁷They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— ³⁸the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹These were **all** commended for their faith, yet **none** of them received what had been promised. ⁴⁰God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever been disappointed even though you got exactly what you wanted? If so, is that enough to teach us that good and bad often travel side by side and are frequently very difficult to identify?
2. Since God's ways are beyond our ability to understand, does it make sense to you that when life takes us places that we don't understand, appreciate or like, that at such times it is more important than at any other time that we operate in the realm of faith, faithfulness, and obedience?
3. Is *doing what's right* simply for the sake of *doing what's right* enough reward for you?

QUOTE

“We want not so much a father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence...whose plan for the universe was such that it might be said at the end of each day. ‘a good time was had by all.’

“I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines, but since it is abundantly clear that I don’t, and since I have reason to believe nevertheless that God is love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction...

“Over a sketch made idly to amuse a child, an artist may not take much trouble: he may be content to let it go even though it is not exactly as he meant it to be. But over the great picture of his life—the work which he loves, thought in a different fashion, as intensely as a man loves a woman or a mother a child—he will take endless trouble—and would, doubtless, thereby give endless trouble to the picture if it were sentient. One can imagine a sentient picture, after being rubbed rubbed and scraped and re-commenced for the tenth time, wishing that it were only a thumb-nail sketch whose making was over in a minute. In the same way, it is natural for us to wish that God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but then we are wishing not for more but for less.

“The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of God who loves is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word, ‘love,’ and limit His (sic) wisdom by what seems to us to be wise.”⁴

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Fransisco: Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 31,32,34,35,40.