

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN?

Fourth in the series "Questions from the Floor"

August 1, 2004

[Romans 8:18-25](#)

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Prayer: You are the God of all truth, the God of deep hiddenness. In your truthfulness, let us know more of you and in knowing you, ourselves as well. We pray in the name of Jesus, where we see you fully, and ourselves clearly. Amen.

As I have attempted to plunge into these questions that you suggested for a summer series, I am struck by several realities about them: They are, every one of them, such vast subjects that the notion of addressing them in 15 to 20 minutes is virtually impossible. Second, they are in many ways organically interrelated with each other. Why there is evil in the world is related to the very nature of God, including questions about heaven and predestination that we have already dealt with. And third, they are ultimately dealing with mystery, and any attempts to answer them will fall short.

Just this week I read an article by a theologian who suggested that there are two kinds of churches that are slowly developing in our American culture: “*answer*” churches and “*journey*” churches. “Answer” churches find their beliefs neatly packaged in the Bible; there is a well-defined answer for every question, and their approach becomes adherence to well-defined belief. “Journey” churches, on the other hand, understand faith as an ongoing discovery. They understand that listening to the Bible is a process. The Bible is taken very seriously, but journey churches listen for God’s voice in the culture as well. They thrive not because they suggest “it doesn’t matter what you believe,” but because they invite people into the adventure of theological reflection and discovery, which in the end is a process of discovering what it means to be a human being in this world.¹ That is what Brooks Ramsey has been doing for us in our summer church school series, and that’s what these sermons are attempting to do as well.

So today we are dealing with a question that is as old as the advent of human beings on this planet. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the righteous suffer? How can God be all powerful and good and allow bad things to happen?

The dilemma is summed up in Archibald MacLeish’s “J.B.”: “If God is good, then he is not God. If God is God, then he is not good.” If God is good, and we take goodness and love as the primary attributes of God, then it seems that this goodness is somehow limited by all the evil in the world. On the other side, if God is God, if power is taken to be the chief attribute of God, then God seems to use this power in ways that are not good for us, or so many feel. Rationally, we can play intellectual games with this and pay our money and take our choice, but living...living this dilemma is a different matter altogether.

For whereas this question is distinctly theological, it is also deeply, deeply experiential, offered out of the depths of pain or the experience of God’s absence. To be

human is to suffer. To be human is to experience personal tragedies with which we cope and try to make sense. Leukemia strikes a child and we wonder why? A young mother dies in childbirth...what's the sense of it all? A life is seemingly wasted in the morass of mental illness. Why? How? Or why did the tornado strike right there...and not just a few blocks away where there were no houses? And why does a nation, poor as it can be and which is in the midst of a drought all of a sudden get hit with a typhoon?

There have been all sorts of attempts to answer these questions: God uses suffering to get our attention, to wake us up from complacency or unbelief, some propose. Others will tell us that God uses suffering to teach us something. Some traditions have even viewed suffering as divine punishment for sins committed. Some of you might remember evangelists suggesting that the terrorist act of 9/11 occurred to punish a nation that had removed prayer in school, supported civil rights of gays and lesbians, and legalized abortion.

Many of the explanations are well-meaning. My first funeral right out of seminary, over in the mountains of Kentucky was a double funeral. A young man had been shot and killed in a brawl, and when his mother heard about it she had a heart attack and died 12 hours later. At the funeral, a traveling preacher who assisted me tried to explain it all to the six year old girl who had lost her mother and her only father figure within a 12 hour span. "Don't cry," he consoled her. "Be happy. God loved your mother so much that He wanted her to be with him." Well-meaning, perhaps, but I wonder what kind of picture that child has of God.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, of course, was the author of the best selling book 20 years ago that posed the question that we are dealing with. Written from the personal perspective of losing his son to a rare disease, he revealed the spiritual poverty of these conventional explanations. For they offer no comfort to those who cry out to heaven and feel the door slammed in their face. They neither touch the greatness of God nor the depth of human suffering.

So let me just offer a few suggestions—not answers...but suggestions—that have helped me deal with this question, and might help you.

First, evil is a mystery. The best answer I have been able to give through the years when people have literally been taking their fists and shaking them in anger at God asking me "Why?" is "I don't know." The Biblical writers did not know why. In Genesis 3 we are simply introduced to the serpent, which was the metaphor for the mysterious evil. We are not told *how* he got there, and even less why. We've always been taught that the basic message here is that temptation leads to destruction. Pick some fruit from a forbidden tree! But that still doesn't answer the question. Why have evil at all? If you were creating the world would you create such a thing? What could have gotten into God's mind? Was it some sadistic streak? Was God having a bad hair day? And how did the idea of disobedience even enter the mind of Eve and Adam, if God did not make it, especially when things were so good in the garden before the fall?

Oh, traditional Christian theology has said that this is the price of our free will, that God gives us the freedom to choose good and evil and not determine ahead of time which we

will do. But that still does not answer the question of why there is evil and why bad things happen to good people. I think this is one of those questions that we are going to have to live with on this side of the eternal, to live with this question in limbo, even with all of the anxiety that that produces. That's hard to do. One of the reasons that people are drawn to fundamentalist churches is that the answers provided remove the anxiety of not having answers.

But I have found that there is some good living the questions. One of my favorite quotes of all time is hanging on my bookcase by my desk and is printed in today's bulletin, from the poet Rilke writing to a young poet:

“I want to beg you as much as I can...to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your hearts and to try to love the questions themselves....Do not seek answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”²

That leads to the second suggestion. Though I do not know why there is evil in the world, or why it has to be, I do not believe that God is the source of it. Put another way, everything that happens to us here on earth is not the will of God. I do not believe that God loves or needs a young mother more than a 6 year old child, and thus would intentionally rob that child of a lifetime of nurture and love. Nor do I believe that God is sitting behind some heavenly computer loading an earthquake here, a typhoon there, a touch of cancer, a little bit of AIDS, a heart attack, a mental illness.

William Barclay, the late, great Scottish biblical scholar, whose commentaries continue to guide laypeople and clergy alike, wrote of the great tragedy in his life, the day his 21 year old daughter and her fiancée were both drowned in a boating accident. “God did not stop that accident at sea, but God did still the storm in my own heart so that somehow my wife and I came through that terrible time still on our own two feet.” Then he told of an anonymous letter that came to him. “Dear Dr. Barclay, I know now why God killed your daughter. It was to save her from corruption by your heresies.” And Barclay wrote in his book, “I know now why God killed your daughter... That—the accidental destruction of the beautiful and good...the will of God? If I had the writer's address, I would have written back, not in anger, the inevitable blaze of anger was over in a flash, but in pity, and I would have said to him, as John Wesley said to someone, ‘Your God is my devil.’ The day my daughter was lost at sea, there was sorrow in the heart of God.”³

Evil is a mystery, and God does not will our suffering. But we don't stop there. There is a third suggestion: It might be helpful to re-phrase the question. You might remember that Rabbi Kushner's book was not entitled “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People,” intended to give the answer. It was entitled “*When* Bad Things Happen to Good People.” Perhaps the question of greater significance might be: “Now that evil has occurred, what am I going to do about it?”

Dorothy Solle, a German theologian put it another way. The question is not “Where does the tragedy come from?” but “Where does it lead?”⁴ And that becomes a question of faith, for it points to an even greater mystery than that of suffering and evil; it points to the mystery of suffering and love, which has the ability to overcome every evil that befalls us, every bit of suffering we endure. Nothing is outside God’s power to redeem. Even on this side of the grave, God can be powerfully present to comfort and give hope.

And sometimes people catch ahold of that truth and become a part of God’s compassion so that God actually gets involved in righting what is wrong in some way.

Rabbi Kushner summarized it this way:

God, who neither causes nor prevents tragedies, helps by inspiring people to help...God shows his opposition to cancer and birth defects, not by eliminating them or making them happen only to bad people, but by summoning forth friends and neighbors to ease the burden and to fill the emptiness. We were sustained in Aaron’s illness by people who made a point of showing that they cared and understood: the man who made Aaron a scaled down tennis racket suitable to his size...the friend who gave him a baseball autographed by the Red Sox, and the children who overlooked his appearance and physical limitations to play stickball with him in the backyard, and who wouldn’t let him get away with anything special. People like that were God’s way of telling our family that we were not alone, not cast off.⁵

To be human is to suffer, to see that life is not always fair. And we live within the shadow of questions that will not be answered this side of heaven. So we do the very best we can, putting our trust in a God as good and as loving as ours, whose Son knew the pain and suffering of a cross, who is not dispassionate about our suffering and our grief, but rather is deeply and passionately involved in them; a God who is more loving toward us than we can possibly imagine, and whose love is made manifest in the love and compassion we bear for each other and in the confidence and hope that God will never leave us alone.

Paul put forth that hope that is at the very heart of our faith, knowing that sometimes that that is our only comfort as we walk this life accompanied by the mysteries that discourage us and might lead us to despair.

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory which shall be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. And we know that the creation has been groaning in travail together until now; as we wait for adoption as children; the redemption of our bodies. In this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

I received a letter this week right as I was struggling with this issue, both intellectually (in the writing of this sermon) but also experientially (having a young friend in ICU, grieving over the needless suffering of war), and this dear soul, who had been through terrible grief ministered to me. I have her permission to quote from the letter:

“Although I don’t know why this happened, I know I have to trust the Lord. I have heard you say that God is so much bigger than we can imagine, and it helps. I’ll never know the answer to why, but maybe that isn’t so important. It’s the trust that counts.”

That’s where my hope is, in trust. That God is good and loving and that God’s every intention is good for me. That the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed to us. I hope for a world where suffering is no more and every tear is wiped away. I hope there is an explanation for all the bad things that have happened even though I don’t understand the mystery of why. I hope and I trust in God. And I wait for it with patience.

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¹ R. Scott Colglazier, “Leading Theologically: Does it Really Matter?”, *Congregations*, Alban Institute, Winter 2004.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, “Letter to a Young Poet,” (New York: Norton, 1954), pp. 34-35.

³ Clive Rawlins, *William Barclay: The Authorized Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) p. 512.

⁴ As quoted in Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), p. 137.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 140-141.

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18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. **19** For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; **20** for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope **21** that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. **22** We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; **23** and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. **24** For in ^{F43} hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes ^{F44} for what is seen? **25** But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.