

July 5 – Job 2:1 – 11

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People

Some years ago Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It soon became a best seller. He was willing to name a persistent problem people of faith have always struggled with. We want to believe that somehow or other our being good people should insulate us from some of the difficulties of life. This desire of ours for reward, and the resulting idea that if bad things happen we deserve it has been around as long as the Bible. Today we read a bit of the story of Job from the Old Testament. It looks at this question of why bad things happen to good people. Jim and Genny Davis asked me to share my thoughts about this age old problem.

We want to believe good living results in good things happening for us. This is a comforting idea when things are going well for us. If we are in good health, our family is doing well and work or retirement is enjoyable we want to believe in this idea. It gives us a part to play in our blessings. We have been good and faithful and so are reaping the rewards. You hear this view proclaimed in Job and it is still shared today. There is some truth to it. When we make good choices we insulate ourselves from some problems. We are not likely to get robbed if we don't go into questionable neighborhoods late at night, for example. Everything is fine with this belief until we experience troubles. Then, just like in Job's case, we think "What did we do wrong?" Job's friends came to support but mostly to say, "Confess your sins." This is the problem when we embrace a cause-and-effect world.

We know ultimately that this isn't how life works. We see some really good people have more than their share of difficulties and tragedies while some, whose lifestyle and actions are less than stellar, seem to go through life with nary a problem.

The question of evil and why it is a part of life is a challenge for people of faith. Alfred North Whitehead, a noted theologian and philosopher said: "All simplifications of religious dogma are shipwrecked upon the rock of the problem of evil." If God is all powerful and all loving why does God allow evil to occur? That is the question that we

struggle with. So, over time here are some of the answers that have been given to the “Why is there evil?” question.

God is not all powerful. Now this idea might surprise you and you think “well, no one really believes this.” Yet we hear stories about the battle between good and evil. They are always portrayed in a way that evil seems to have a chance of winning. Or we say, “The devil made me do it.” That means God couldn’t or wouldn’t stop you. It means God was powerless in that situation. Now we might say those things, without thinking about their implications but we don’t really believe it.

So, another idea is that God allows evil to happen. This is in part the story of Job. God allows all of the trials that beset Job to happen. Would any of us want to worship a God who decides today to cause troubles in our life or a family member just because? That would make God a tyrant in the sky, to be feared but not to be worshiped. Yet we sometimes proclaim this theology. When something bad happens we say, “Why did God do this?” Or, “Why did God let this happen.” Ultimately we know God is loving and compassionate so we must reject this idea.

Another idea is that God hands out good and evil for reasons only God understands. This is ultimately the theology of Job. He says, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” In his later conversations with God this is the theology proclaimed. God says, and I am paraphrasing here, “You don’t know a thing. Shut up and accept believing that I am in charge.” This, at least, is a theology that challenges us to trust instead of fear. It allows for a bigger plan to be in place. But still, it makes God the cause agent for evil and I am not comfortable with that idea.

The last idea that I have heard is that God created the world and now has turned God’s back on the world. Things have been set in motion and we are left to deal with the consequences. God doesn’t cause evil to happen but God is also not really involved in any of our life. That distancing of God is not a good idea either.

It is hard to figure out why bad things happen when we say God is loving and compassionate. So, what are my views on why bad things happen?

Sometimes we view things from the short term moment instead of taking the long view of life. There is an ancient Chinese parable that dates from about the same time as Jesus.

The Chinese tell the story of an old man who owned a bony plow horse. One spring afternoon the horse ran away. The old man's friends, trying to console him, said, "We're so sorry about your horse, old man. What a misfortune you've had." But the old man said, "Bad news, good news-who knows?"

A few days later the horse returned home leading a herd of wild horses. Again the friends came running. Filled with jubilation, they cried, "How wonderful!" But the old man whispered, "Good news, bad news-who knows?"

The next day, when the farmer's son was trying to ride one of the new horses, the young man was thrown to the ground and broke both legs. The friends gasped. The old man stood still and said, "Bad news, good news-who knows?"

And a short time later when the village went to war and all the young men were drafted to fight, the farmer's son was excused because of two broken legs. Good news. Bad news. Who knows?

The moral of this proverb is that good and bad are relative to how we see them in the bigger picture.

We need patience when we are going through difficult times because we really don't know how this event might fit into the bigger picture. We don't know if there is ultimately a redeeming part to this story. Now I understand that this is not always true. Some tragic things will never cease to be tragic even with time and perspective. But sometimes the way we view things does change or at least their impact is moderated.

Secondly when bad things happen we need to pause and reflect. Instead of asking "Why me?" why not say, "Why not me?" This is a reminder that life happens. As Job said, some of what we experience is good and some not so good. This is life. I try to

remember this when I am experiencing difficult times. It is happening to me, not because I am being punished, not because I need to learn an answer, not even because I am strong enough to deal with it but because life happens. We may not like this randomness but it is part of life.

There is also some randomness in being in the wrong place at the wrong time or the right place at the right time. We all hear the stories of people missing a plane or changing flights on a plane that crashed or being somewhere when an earthquake happens. In a world where people are free to make choices, and some of them are not very good, where natural disasters happen, we sometimes get caught up in the mix of life. This thought may not be that comforting, but it is better than believing that God caused an earthquake that kills thousands to punish an individual, or that you were better than the hundreds on the plane that did take the doomed flight.

Also, there is some causality to why things happen to us. People get lung cancer because they smoke, have diabetes because they are overweight, end up in a wreck because they drive distractedly. We need to own those events instead of blaming God. And sometimes we are just unlucky. We have the genetic dispensation to a disease and need to understand that this is life and we will not all live forever.

So there are some of the explanations I use to make some rational sense to why things happen to people. They don't explain everything. Somethings will need to be resolved when we get to heaven. These ideas give me strength and unhook me from blaming all of my woes on God. Job understood this. He would always proclaim that God was with him whether life was full of blessings or trials. This was the strength he needed to keep going. When we embrace that God is with us in all we are experiencing it won't answer the why questions but will give us strength, increase our trust and fill us with love. We are never abandoned.

Finally, there is hope. Tomorrow always contains the possibilities of better things for our lives. This side of heaven it may not always turn out as well as we want but we are not alone. God is with us and loves us and those we care about. God isn't punishing them when bad things happen. Ultimately, in the journey of life we must trust.