

Got Questions? Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?
Genesis 1:26-31; Luke 13:1-5
October 17, 2010

Maybe it's the burning down of a house of a friend.

Perhaps it's cancer that threatens the body of a young person.

Maybe it's a child who is abducted, murdered and left abandoned.

All of these cause us to wonder about the question: If God is a good and loving God, then why are there tragedy and evil, pain and suffering, in the world?

This question has bothered mankind all through history. I preached a sermon on it as recently as 2007 after a troubled young man opened fire on fellow students at Virginia Tech.

In 1981, as a result of personal tragedy in his own life Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People.

People wrestled with the same questions following the Holocaust of WWII. How could a good God allow 6 million Jews to be exterminated?

In the 13th Century, theological debates were held at the University of Paris on the subject of suffering and pain in the world.

Somewhere around 1800-2000BC a man named Job lived, and his story was written down.

I am struck by how universal and ancient these questions are. They are as old as Job and are asked by the wisest people among us. When I was in seminary there was a course on theodicy – the area of theology that deals with evil, suffering and pain in light of a loving God. It was an interesting course. However, we were given no definitive answers. But, as we look into scripture and nature (which scripture tells us testifies to God) we can *begin* to gain an understanding of the question of God, mankind and evil.

I

Let's take a look at Nature, first. It is appropriate to start here because Scripture sometimes uses nature to address universal questions. Are our lives simply subject to the whims of nature or does God somehow use the forces of nature to accomplish his will? Before we answer this question let me draw attention to something we all do as humans. We ask questions.

Questions are especially hard to answer in tragic times. But we ask questions anyway. If you

were to take a tour of the Bible you would find that one book has a disproportionate number of questions - the book of Job. Job has over 330 questions in its 42 chapters.

So why does the book of Job have so many more questions? Simple. It is because the book of Job deals with a horrible tragedy, and we ALL question tragedy.

Recall with me: Job is a righteous man. Suddenly, without warning, his family and business is wiped out. Two rogue groups from Arabia and Mesopotamia conduct a raid taking away Job's livestock and putting his servants to the sword. Then his family is lost in a freak accident when a mighty wind sweeps in from the desert, striking the four corners of the house, collapsing it and all are lost. It was swift and it made no sense.

We do what Job did when he learned of his loss. We mourn. He was silent when he received the first two reports that his business and livestock had been wiped out. Those can be replaced. But when he received the news that his children were lost, he got up and tore his robe. Then, he fell on his knees and wept: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return." Everything that had meaning in his life was gone. As he came into this world so Job felt he was leaving it - naked.

Did God cause that mighty wind to blow through Job's life? I tell you, No.

Does God make tsunamis, hurricanes, tornados, mudslides, floods happen so that he can inflict suffering upon the people of the world? No.

In our day, we have come to understand that there are other explanations for why we have natural disasters. Hurricanes arrive, not because God has a desire to punish evil, but because the prevailing winds, ocean currents and fronts combine in ways that make tropical storms more likely at certain times of the year. The same is true of earthquakes, tornadoes, or floods. All of these are directed by the forces of nature. The forces of nature were set up by God as part of the way the earth works – in good times and bad...and without respect to the moral climate or condition of the people who happen to be living in a region where disaster strikes. There is no moral judgment inherent in an act of nature. In other words, an earthquake or hurricane is just an earthquake or a hurricane; weather does not act with a moral impunity.

II

Let's now move from the acts of nature to the acts of man. For all that nature has done to wreak havoc upon the earth, mankind has perhaps done more to cause damage to himself, to others and to the earth itself. Luke 13 offers a look at how Jesus might address man's inhumanity to man. Let's read it.

Luke 13:1-5

About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple. "Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?" Jesus asked. "Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God. And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too."

In this text we have tragic national events in the life of Israel during Jesus' time. One of the events appears to be an accidental collapse of a structure at a building site that killed 18 people and the other was a military operation against civilians ordered by Pontius Pilate.

Pilate, perhaps angered by something that occurred in Galilee, decided to make an example of a group of Galilean Jews who were visiting Jerusalem. He ordered his soldiers to go into the Temple in the middle of the day, while there were probably hundreds of people worshipping there, and execute these Galileans.

Pilate sent a political and religious message by slaying a group of men who were more likely than not, innocent. Now the Galilean territory may have done something that set Pilate off but these men quite likely had nothing to do with it. They were - convenient. In the wrong place at the right time.

Let me ask you: Why is a story of a senseless massacre in the Bible? It's there because the disciples wanted to ask Jesus a very specific question. They wanted to know if these people died because they had sinned? Was this God's judgment because of their immoral living? Jesus gives a very simple answer: No. He then goes on to say, "You," (talking to the disciples) must repent or you will likewise perish." In other words, these things happen. Life can be indiscriminate and unfair. One day you are here and the next you die in an accident or at the hands of some thug. Jesus is saying, more important than *earthly* tragedy is the tragedy of a *lost soul*...so repent. Maybe this is Jesus' way of communicating that while these tragic actions are *not caused* by God, they *can be used* by God to motivate people to turn to Him.

Now, this tells me something very important. God is not up there pulling all the strings. There is chaos. There is evil. There is uncertainty. It would be dishonest to say that God makes everything all right in this world. Illness, natural disasters, man's atrocities committed against fellow men...these all are examples of how a fallen world enters our life and wreaks havoc.

III

So, the final question: Where is God in the midst of all of this suffering, evil and pain?

God is right there with us. God knows what it is to suffer and to feel pain. How many times in the Bible do we find God hurt at his people turning away from Him. In the New Testament, God allowed his Son to suffer. If God did not exclude himself from suffering, then why would he exclude us from difficulties in life?

Why do bad things happen to good people? Maybe a better question is why shouldn't bad things happen to good people. Are we any better than Jesus (who, by the way, was a good person)? If God did not spare his Son the pain and anguish that can be experienced in this world, then he will not shield the best among us from evil or pain either.

The truth is that much of our suffering we cause ourselves. For instance, the suffering that the Israelites had to endure as they were taken into captivity in a foreign land was brought on because God allowed them to experience the consequences of their disobedient acts. Many times the suffering associated with natural events (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes) is a consequence of people building structures on fault lines and in flood plains.

But no matter whether we cause our own suffering or we experience something that is the result of an evil act of someone else; or, perhaps someone is suffering due to no fault of anyone (such as cancer in a child), God is still with us and works in our lives as He redeems the evil, pain and suffering for his purposes.

Doug Muder writes, "We can be angry at what has happened to us, without feeling that we are angry at God. More than that, we can recognize our anger at life's unfairness – our instinctive compassion at seeing people suffer – as coming from God who teaches us to be angry at injustice and to feel compassion for the afflicted. Instead of feeling that we are opposed to God, we can feel that our indignation is a manifestation of God's anger at unfairness, that when we cry out, we are still on God's side, and He is still on ours."

One might ask whether a better world could not have been created. But that prompts the question: "Better for what?" Better for our purposes or for God's?

God's wants to be in relationship with you for all eternity. While I don't believe that suffering and evil was a part of His original plan, I do find evidence that the *possibility* of it was built in to Creation, otherwise our freedom to choose good or evil would make no sense.

John MacMurray points out that most religions promise in one way or another to deliver their adherents from suffering. Such religions say to their devotees, "Follow me, and the things you fear will not happen to you."

By contrast, Christianity says, “Follow Christ, and some or all of the things that you fear may happen to you; but you do not have to fear them anyway.”

I continue to be inspired by the people I know in our church, and friends and family I have outside the church who, in the midst of suffering, instead of turning away from God, grow even closer to Him. They find in God a welcoming port in the midst of the storms of life.

In the midst of your own suffering and pain I hope you will also turn to the One who extends arms of comfort and says...

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)