

# Bad Things Happen to Good People

Job 35:1-16

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Many years ago I visited Henry and Ernestine Beukema in their home as Henry approached the end of life — it had been a tough season as Henry’s life was slipping away. Henry had landed at Normandy on June 7, 1944 as a military chaplain. He was told by his commanding officer to preach a sermon that day for the men on the ship. Their ship was later sunk during the invasion but Henry survived. After the war in Japan, between 1948-51, he raised \$75,000 through sales of second-hand clothing from San Francisco to start a Protestant denomination. The schools there continued to provide children with training in Christian leadership up until the day I met with him in the early 1990s. His first wife died of leukemia and he then married his second wife, Ernestine, after only 26 days of courtship. Henry had lived a full life.

I entered Henry’s bedroom where I found him listening to my sermon from Youth Sunday. His first words were, “I thank God for your ministry!” How affirming that was for a young youth minister to hear. I asked them how they were doing and Ernestine responded, “This past year we’ve learned some wonderful things in a terrible sort of way.” That expression is memorable and has stayed with me through the years. I received a great deal from our visit that day. “Every member in ministry” means in part that we ministers receive so much from *your* faith!

The Book of Job is about “learning some wonderful things in a terrible sort of way!” Suffering and God! Rabbi Harold S. Kushner’s book “*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*” is about the ancient challenge known as theodicy. How can we reconcile a good God with the experience of human suffering?

At his Methodist church, Bishop Melvin Wheatley tells the story of preaching on the subject of suffering and its meaning. After sharing his most profound insights and expounding on the

Scriptural witness to the best of his ability, he was greeted at the door following worship by one woman who commented, “Oh Reverend Wheatly, I never knew what it meant to really suffer, until I heard you preach!”

Human suffering breaks into our experience in the most inopportune times and in the most devastating ways. There is no good time for bad things to happen. A phone call comes in the middle of the night, a heart attack occurs in the middle of the day, a car accident, illness, the wrong place at the wrong time — suffering and grief come upon us quickly and unexpectedly, and we can find ourselves searching desperately, agonizingly for answers to our question “Why?”

The Book of Job is one of the finest pieces of literature ever written. Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century Scottish essayist, described the Book of Job as “. . . the most wonderful poem of any age and language; our first, oldest statement of the never-ending problem: man’s destiny and God’s way with him here on this earth . . . There is nothing written in the Bible, or out of it, of equal literary merit.”<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Harold Kushner describes the Book of Job as “. . . a profound and beautiful book on the most profound of subjects, the question of why God let’s good people suffer.”<sup>2</sup> Some see a parallel between Job and the people of Israel beginning with promise, health, wealth, national identity and then, subsequently, with loss through exile, and finally looking forward with the expectation of restoration. Others see the outline of the Book of Job as something of a parable of the entire Biblical story beginning with blessing in the creation, then loss in the fall and suffering throughout the history of God’s people, complete with crucifixion (a cosmic struggle between good and evil) and finally restoration in Revelation. It is a complex piece of literature that takes up a complex problem for people of faith. Occasionally you may hear someone being described as having “the patience of Job.” That phrase comes not only from our text today but also from the only reference to Job in the entire New Testament found in James 5:11.

So what’s in a name? “Job,” like many biblical names, points to a deeper significance of the story. Like the poetic Hebrew construction in the text itself, it is difficult to precisely determine the

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1 Kushner, Harold S., *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981) p. 31

2 *Ibid* pg. 2

meaning. According to some scholars, the name is a contraction of a name in Hebrew, which means "Where is the divine father?" On the other hand, there is a construction that suggests the meaning is closer to "the hated or persecuted one." In either or both cases, the meaning of the name has everything to do with the experience of feeling God forsaken. Jesus knew this experience. On the cross, he quoted (from Psalm 22), "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?" It is known as the cry of dereliction.

Job's wife asks him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." But Job remains steadfastly resolute in his determination to live before God, and to believe, in spite of his experience of tragedy, that God is good and loving, and so responds with a question of his own, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" Questions abound in this text; rhetorical questions, existential questions, aggressive and assertive questions. As one commentator describes it, "Job's questions about God are embedded within God's questions about Job."<sup>3</sup> Job is in physical and existential crisis. And the conventional view of things, divine and human, is deconstructed and a new view is constructed instead.

"Is God worthy to be worshipped, given the experience of life, especially in its tragic dimensions?" The question posed by Job. "Is Job only worshiping because it is easy and he is well rewarded and protected for doing so?" The question posed in the heavenly court.

Kushner tells the story of assisting a middle-aged couple early in his professional life. They had a bright, nineteen-year-old daughter in her freshman year away of college:

One morning they received a phone call from the school's health center telling them that their daughter had collapsed on the way to class. "It seems a blood vessel burst in her brain. She died before we could do anything for her. We're terribly sorry," they said. As Kushner entered the home, he expected to find anger, shock, and grief but the first words they said to him were, "You know Rabbi, we didn't fast last Yom Kippur." Why did they think they were somehow responsible for this tragedy? Who taught them to believe in a God who would strike down, without warning, an attractive, gifted young woman as punishment for someone else's ritual infraction?"<sup>4</sup>

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3 Janzen, Gerald J., Job (Atlanta: John Knox Press, *Interpretation Series* 1985) p. 21

4 Ibid. p. 8-9

Wanting to make sense of our experience of life, we often prefer to believe that our behavior can control the outcome of things. We can make something of ourselves, and that is indeed true. But the flip side of that understanding is that we must also be responsible for the bad things that happen to us. The simplistic notion that we are rewarded when we do well and are punished by God when we suffer is also what the Book of Job seeks to challenge. Job's friends hold that view. And it's an inadequate understanding.

A good friend of mine told me during his ordeal fighting cancer, "I wouldn't wish this experience on my worst enemy. It is horrible and painful and frightening, but I also wouldn't trade it for anything. For I have learned things and now understand faith and hope and love in ways I never did, nor could have, before." His experience of the Lord was profoundly deepened and strengthened as he faced his own mortality. "Some wonderful things in a terrible sort of way."

This reminds me of the poem by Robert Browning Hamilton *Along the Road*:

I walked a mile with pleasure, she chattered all the way;  
but left me none the wiser for all she had to say.  
I walked a mile with Sorrow and ne'er a word said she;  
But oh, the things I learned from her, when sorrow walked with me.  
We may indeed learn from sorrow and suffering,  
and there is truth to the familiar saying that,  
What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."  
Yet, not all suffering is redemptive. Some of it is just plain horrendous.<sup>5</sup>

And from a Pulitzer-winning play about Job:

I heard upon his dry dung heap, yhat man cry out who cannot sleep  
'If God is God he is not good, If God is good he is not God;  
Take the even, take the odd, I would not sleep here if I could  
Except for the little green leaves in the wood  
And the wind on the water.'<sup>6</sup>

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5 Robert Browning Hamilton, *Along the Road* [http://www.equeenox.com/words/poems/fossils/hamilton\\_alongtheroad.html](http://www.equeenox.com/words/poems/fossils/hamilton_alongtheroad.html)

6 MacLeish, Archibald, JB (*Pulitzer Prize Play Boston*: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958) p. 11

The story of Job protests against simplistic answers to the most perplexing questions of human existence. According to Kushner, “Let us take note of three statements which everyone in the book, and most of the readers, would like to be able to believe:

- A. God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens in the world. Nothing happens without God’s willing it.
- B. God is just and fair, and stands for people getting what they deserve, so that the good prosper and the wicked are punished.
- C. Job is a good person.

As long as Job is healthy and wealthy, we can believe all three of those statements at the same time with no difficulty. When Job suffers, when he loses his possessions, his family, his health, we have a problem. We can no longer make sense of all three propositions together. We can now affirm any two only by denying the third.”<sup>7</sup>

Job’s friends conclude therefore that Job must not be a good person and should confess his sins. But Job protests that he has done nothing to deserve his plight. His existential questions finally receive a response from God in the story but not all his questions are answered. It is as if the answer begins with another question, “Are you God? Then let me be God!” Unsatisfying perhaps but some things cannot be known this side of eternity.

Human existence has more uncertainty and ambiguity than we sometimes care to admit. People of faith often try to take all the mystery out of human existence — as if life can be calculated simply and it is all black and white. There are incongruities and uncertainties that cannot be easily explained. We cannot take all the mystery out of living. When we experience tragedy, we may not know why but we are not left to our own resources. Here are three things we can know:

1. It’s not your fault! Sometimes we bring pain into our own lives by our choices, but in many cases, we are likely to blame ourselves for things that we have no control over. We feel guilty about things we have done or failed to do, and we think God is watching

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 37

and is seeking to balance the scales of justice. Tragedy is God's way of punishing us. It's not your fault! Part of what it means to be human is living in a world where unseen bacteria like E. coli gets in the food supply and our bodies become infected. We cannot control everything – even the deterioration of our bodies and lives. It's not your fault! God is not punishing you!

2. You're not alone! We all face the uncertainties of life and the inexplicable challenge of tragedy. Those uncertainties are better survived when we have the resources of a church community to which we belong and which can provide support during times of difficulty. But more than that, we worship a Lord who is "with us," Emmanuel. Your personal suffering matters to God! Your pain, whether it be physical or emotional, is the Lord's concern. Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus and the suffering of his sisters. Our faith does not protect us from all suffering. In fact, it may lead to suffering as we seek to be more faithful to the Lord. We are not like water that takes the path of least resistance. Avoiding pain is no way to live. We are to take stands (sometimes even difficult ones) because of our faith. But as the Scriptures tell us, ". . . the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."<sup>8</sup>
3. The Lord has suffered, and in Christ and the crucifixion, Jesus has taken upon himself the pain of suffering and death so that he might meet us in the depths of our suffering and transcend death to life, and suffering to joy. Even in the valley of the shadow of death we can fear no evil for God is with us.

We may not have all the answers we want but we do have the assurance that our lives are in the hands of the Lord.

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 8: 18-25

When our daughter lost her first pregnancy she was beside herself. She prayed her own cry of dereliction, “Lord, what am I supposed to do?” And she heard an audible answer to her prayer — one of the few times in her life. “Just Wait! Be patient! It’s not over yet!” Now, years later, she has two healthy and wonderful children. This side of eternity we will not have all the answers. But we’ll learn “. . . some wonderful things in a terrible sort of way.”

“Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”