

In 1981 a book was published that became a national best seller. The unusual thing was it was a religious book, written by a Jewish rabbi, Harold S. Kushner. His book was titled, When Bad Things Happen To Good People. In the book he tried to answer a question that people have asked for centuries. That question is why. Why do bad things happen to good people? Or to put it another way, Why is there suffering and pain in the world?

Mr. Kushner knew something about suffering. His son was born with a condition known as progeria (proh-jeer'-ee-ah) or rapid aging. He was told that his son would never be more than three feet tall, would not have any hair on any part of his body, would look like an old man while still a child, and would die in his teens. All of that came true.

Let me read to you what he says when he found out the diagnosis of his son,

How does one handle news like that? I was a young inexperienced rabbi, not as familiar with the process of grief as I would later come to be, and what I mostly felt that day was a deep, aching sense of unfairness. It didn't make sense. I had been a good person. I had tried to do what was right in the sight of God. More than that, I was living a more religiously committed life than most people I knew, people who had large, healthy families. I believed that I was following Gods' ways and doing His work. How could this be happening to my family? If God existed, if He was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He do this to me?

And even if I could persuade myself that I deserved this punishment for some sin of neglect or pride that I was not aware of, on what grounds did Aaron (his son) have to suffer? He was an innocent child, a happy, outgoing three-year-old. Why should he have to suffer physical and psychological pain every day of his life?

(When Bad Things Happen To Good People, by Harold S. Kushner, Avon books, 1981, p. 2-3)

Mr. Kushner, in trying to solve his dilemma, came down to one basic proposition. The Bible presents God as both good and all-powerful.

Now, Mr. Kushner's thinking went like this:

A: If God is good, then He would WANT to stop suffering.

B; If God is all-powerful, He COULD stop suffering.

C: Yet we still have suffering.

So either:

D: God is all-powerful, but not good, or

E: God is good, but not all-powerful.

Choosing to believe either of those final two options means that you deny part of what God has revealed to us in the Bible about Himself. You are saying that part of what the Bible says is untrue.

Mr. Kushner decided to believe the second possibility. He chose to believe that God is good, but is not powerful enough to prevent human suffering. He chooses to believe that the Bible does not present a truthful picture of God.

Now, Mr. Kushner leaves out a third possibility. There is another option. A third possibility is that the Bible is totally true in what it reveals about God. God is good and God is all-powerful. But our definition of good is wrong. Mr. Kushner's assumptions about what is good are wrong.

Mr. Kushner used the word good in two ways. He used it about people in the title of his book. He assumes there are good people. And he used it for God in his statements about God.

First, he believes there are good people who do not deserve to suffer. In fact, he believes himself to be a good man. We read in the quote from his book that he believes himself to be a good man, certainly good enough to be blessed by God. He believes he deserves a large, healthy family of many children. He believes he has earned that by his religious behavior. In fact, he implies that God is unfair in not giving him a big family of healthy children. You can hear a pride in himself in his statement.

In contrast to this belief God reveals to us in the New Testament that we are all sinners. That means that all people are basically bad, not good. We think most about ourselves, not God. We seek most of the time to accomplish our own will, not God's will.

We are all sinners. And for sin, we all deserve death. While some people are morally better than others, they are not moral enough to deserve life. While some people are more religious than others, they are not religious enough to deserve life. While some people are more focused on seeking God and his will than other people are, they are not seeking Him enough to deserve life. Our good does not overcome our bad. We are sinners and deserve death, not life.

The fact that we sinners are still alive and not dead is a gift from God. We are not alive because we deserve to be alive. It is by God's mercy and grace that we are alive.

So Mr. Kushner's first use of the word good is wrong. He is not a good man. In fact, there are no good men or women or teens or children. Mr. Kushner may indeed be a better man than most of the people he knows. But he is not even close to being good enough to deserve the life he desires.

His second use of the word good is also wrong. He says God is good just as the Bible says. But he assumes that what that means is that God wants the good that we want for ourselves. Mr. Kushner wants a life without pain and suffering. If God wants that, he is good. If God doesn't want us to have a life without pain and suffering, He is not good.

But this is backwards thinking. Mankind is not define the goodness of God by what we want. We are to define the goodness of God by what God wants. Man would like no pain at all. Yet God has allowed pain. He must have a purpose for allowing pain and suffering in our lives. Man's idea of good and God's idea of good are in conflict. Let me illustrate from my own parenting experience.

When my sons were growing up, their definition of me loving them was that I let them do whatever they want. One son said, "If you love us, you'll let us do what we want." But that was not how I defined my love for them. I defined loving them as doing what was best for them. And I knew that letting them do whatever they wanted was not best for

them, keeping them safe. I knew they would hurt themselves or each other if I just let them do whatever they wanted. So our definitions of love were in conflict with each other. And in fact, when they ignored me and did whatever they wanted, one or both of them often got hurt. They suffered pain by their actions. And they learned a lesson. And that is why God allows pain and suffering in our lives, to teach us, to shape us, to mold us, to perfect us. God uses pain and suffering to make us better. God uses pain and suffering to accomplish His goals for us.

And God's goals for mankind are very different from man's goals for himself, as we see in a quick review.

God's first goal is that you acknowledge God and thank Him for your life.

We see this in Romans 1.

Romans 1:19-20 (NIV) "...what may be known about God is plain to them (all people), because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made..."

These verses tell how God has made His existence known to mankind. The surrounding verses reveal that God expects us to acknowledge Him and give Him thanks for our lives.

God's second goal is that you seek Him.

Acts 17:26-27 (NIV) From one man he (God) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him...

God's purpose is that we seek Him. And even in non-Christian nations, those people who genuinely seek God are led by God to learn of Jesus so they can be saved.

God's third goal is that you receive Jesus as both Savior and Lord.

God wants a personal relationship with you, as well as every person on earth. Such a relationship becomes a reality when you receive Jesus as both Savior and Lord.

God's fourth goal is that you live the gift of His salvation by living led by the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 5:16 (NIV) So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (flesh).

Look at the results of living led by the Spirit. The Spirit will produce in you the character of Jesus.

Romans 8:28-29 (NIV) "... we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him... For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son..."

Part of that likeness is described in Galatians 5.

Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

As you live by the leading of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit is going to change you on the inside, which will, in turn, change your outward behavior. The Holy Spirit will produce in you the character of Jesus. **As you become more like Jesus on the inside, you will act more like Jesus.**

This is what God is doing in the Christian.

Now, what does all this have to do with suffering? God uses all of our experiences to make us like Jesus. God even uses suffering in the process of conforming us to the likeness of Jesus.

For example, in the book of Job, we see a man who loved God, who faithfully served God. But we see a man who was proud. And God needed to get rid of Job's pride so that their relationship could grow deeper. God did so using the devil. The devil wanted to hurt Job. The devil wanted to make Job suffer. God gave the devil permission to do so, but for God's purpose, not the devil's purpose. God needed Job to see his own pride.

We don't have time to review the story. But the devil attacked Job, and in the end, Job humbles himself before God. We will read that part.

Job 40:3-4 (NIV) Then Job answered the LORD: "I am unworthy--how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth.

Then God speaks again and Job answers, in part...

42:1-6 Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.

God confronts Job and Job humbles himself before God. The missionary, Paul, had a similar experience. He writes of God humbling him using the devil. God had given Paul some special supernatural experiences.

2 Corinthians 12:7 (NIV) To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

So one of the purposes of God for suffering is to humble us and work on our character.

How then should we respond to suffering in our lives?

We should pray prayers like the following:

**Lord, what are You needing to teach me by this suffering?
Lord, use this bad experience to transform me.**

Jesus is calling you to submit yourself to Him today, and receive Him as Savior and Lord of your life.