

Why Bad Things Happen – 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 – June 21, 2009

Let me start out apologizing to all the dads for dealing with such an intense topic on your special day. I was tempted to just start out by saying that bad things happen because men rule the world – or at least think they do – but decided that was probably not a good idea. I hope it does help that one of our dads requested this topic so I suspect it is relevant for all of us so let's get right to it.

In 1981 Rabbi Harold Kushner published a rather famous little book called "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." One thing that makes it really compelling it is was written in the memory of his son Aaron Zev Kushner. Aaron was born in 1963 and by all indications was a normal and very bright boy. By the age of two, Aaron could identify a dozen different kinds of dinosaurs and could explain to adults that dinosaurs were extinct.

The Kushner's however were concerned that once Aaron reached the age of eight months he stopped gaining weight. They took him to various doctors who checked him out and assured them he would grow up to be a normal person, except for the fact that he would be very short.

When Aaron reached his third birthday, the Kushner's became acquainted with a doctor who was an expert on growth deficiencies. After some studies and tests the doctor told them that their son had a condition called Progeria. The doctor then explained that Aaron's condition was known more commonly as "rapid aging." He then revealed that Aaron never grow past three feet tall and would look like a little old man even though he was still a child. The worst news of all was that Aaron would not live past his teenage years.

Rabbi Kushner's book was published four years after Aaron's death at 14 years of age. The book is a very personal effort to deal with the loss of a beloved son and to discover how people of religious faith can understand tragic events in their life. Kushner's struggle to understand why bad things happen is a struggle that humans have attempted to undertake since the beginning. It is a struggle that many of us at some time in our life are forced to ponder when something happens to us or to someone we love.

Through the centuries, the Christian faith has offered a variety of answers to that question. All of them based in some part and to some extent on various passages found within the scriptures. Let's briefly explore these possible explanations and see if they help us reconcile a loving, powerful God with a sin-sick struggling world.

First, it is God's will and God knows what is best. This is the answer of classical Calvinism; of very traditional Presbyterianism. John Calvin once wrote, "All events are governed by God's secret plan, nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by God."

This answer says that God holds all things in God's hand. So, we must simply trust that God has a reason or a purpose for allowing whatever it is that happens to us. It is the answer you hear – even among those who are not especially religious – when someone says, "Everything happens for a reason." But there is at least one problem with this answer: It is often impossible to figure out what the reason is for what is happening. It is some sort of divine mystery we either are not supposed to know or we haven't been made privy to.

Now some people do seem to find comfort in that answer – they are okay with leaving it in God’s hands and not questioning. But others struggle with the thought of living in quiet resignation trying to trust God while wondering at the same time what that particular reason might be.

Second, God is teaching us something. In this answer, what happens to us is seen as a way of teaching us something. Perhaps a trial is given to us to produce some sort of character trait within us. Maybe God gives us a trying situation to teach us patience. Or perhaps God takes something away from us to teach us to trust him.

In this answer, everything that happens is some sort of divine lesson from God sent to teach us what we have not yet learned. But once again, there is at least one problem with this answer: It can also become a guessing game to figure out what it is God wants us to learn. We are placed in the awkward position of trying to figure out what God wants to teach us.

A somewhat humorous story tells of a well-meaning friend who visits his buddy in the hospital after having back surgery. After exchanging some small talk the friend asks, “So what is God teaching you through this experience?” His friend, taken aback by the question, finally responds, “God is teaching me that undergoing back surgery hurt like –“

Next God is testing us. This is the answer taken from the opening section of the book of Job in which God is pictured as allowing the accuser to test Job. In this test of Job’s faith, the accuser takes away Job’s children and everything he owns. This answer sees bad things that happen to us as a trial of faith in which God is testing us to see what we are made of. This answer pictures God as a “coach” up in the sky, maybe one like Bobby Knight, constantly yelling at us and blowing a whistle, pushing us to our

limits, seeing how much we can handle. This is the sort of answer someone most likely has in mind when they say, "God won't give us more than we can bear." God may push us to the breaking point but we can be assured he will finally relent.

One problem through is that some people – even people of faith- seem to face a whole lot more than they can bear. And as a result they give up their faith in God. They thought God was there to watch over them, to protect them, to keep them safe from harm. When that didn't happen they turned away from God because God didn't keep up his end of the bargain.

And finally, God is punishing us. This is the answer taken from various part of the Bible such as the middle section of the book of Job. In that part of the book, each one of Job's friends approaches Job and says he must have done something to deserve such a severe punishment. This answer draws a correlation between things we have done and the suffering we endure. It is the answer of a woman who thinks her miscarriage is punishment for an abortion she had as a teenager. Or a child who thinks his father left the home because of something he did or said.

Now it is true we do sometimes suffer the consequences of things we do. A tobacco smoker gets cancer. An alcoholic gets liver cancer. A sexually active teenage girl gets pregnant. We can't expect to be exempt from the consequences of our actions. But good and decent folks – even folks who make mistakes in life – should never be in a position of thinking that an undeserved or tragic circumstance in life is some sort of divine punishment and that they deserved what they got. The good news of the gospel is that God is a God of grace – not a God of karma. God does not reward us when we are good and punish us when we are bad. God gives grace freely to all.

I have just offered four different and traditional answers to the question of “why bad things happen.” Some of these answers offer a bit more truth than others. But each answer – especially if pushed to the extreme or offered as some sort of universal explanation for suffering – does what an answer to the question of suffering should never do:

They distance us from God in the midst of our suffering. They offer explanations that push God’s presence far away from us. They offer answers that make God out to be some distant and aloof deity. And, if we are not careful with these explanations, God can quickly become:

- A strict parent who says “Too bad, that’s just the way it is. Father knows best.”
- A spiteful teacher who for some reason unknown to us seems to just have it out for us.
- A cruel coach who keeps blowing the whistle yelling, “no pain, no gain.”
- Or a harsh judge who hands out punishment saying, “you get what you deserve.”

I wonder though – are these really the sorts of pictures of God that we see in Jesus Christ? When we look at Jesus – in whom God’s fullness was pleased to dwell – do we see a God who is some sort of cruel and distant deity; pulling the strings, relentlessly blowing the whistle, banging down the gavel? I think not.

In Jesus Christ we discover a God who, as the writer of the gospel of John says came to “pitch his tents among us” and who was called Immanuel – “God with us.” In Jesus Christ we discover a God who wept with Mary in her grief at the death of her brother and his friend “Lazarus.” And we see a God who weeps with each one of us in the midst of the circumstances of our own suffering.

In Jesus Christ we discover one who endured the pain of the cross crying out to his Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And we see a Father who grieved for the death of his very own son at the hands of all the evil and suffering that this world could throw at him.

Remember Rabbi Kushner from earlier – the one who lost his son? Rabbi Kushner seems to suggest that God has nothing to offer us in the midst of our suffering. Tragic stuff happens to everyone, he says, and the best we can do is just cope with it. Kushner writes:

Let me suggest that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen to us. They do not happen for any good reason which would cause us to accept them willingly. But we can give them a meaning. We can redeem these tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them.

Now, on one hand I think Rabbi Kushner’s answer has some truth to it. As people of faith, we must recognize that we live in a world in which tsunamis and earthquakes bury thousands of victims. Cancer strikes the young and old alike. Trusses on bridges break during rush hour plunging cars into the river. That is simply the type of world we live in and that means we ought to be very careful in offering answers that say God has either inflicted us or protected us from such tragedy. Or that it is some kind of divine plan. Or that God sent it to teach us something or to test our faith.

But on the other hand, from a Christian perspective, Rabbi Kushner’s answer is missing something. What Kushner does not – or cannot offer – is the type of God we find in Jesus Christ. Rabbi Kushner does not – cannot offer us – the assurance that Paul writes of in our scripture passage from this morning. In that passage Paul is

struggling with an unknown thorn in his flesh, perhaps a physical malady or some sort of trying circumstance inflicting him with suffering.

In that passage he prays three times that God might take it away from him. That God might lift it from him. And the answer Paul hears back is, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. Power is made perfect in weakness. You see God's power is revealed in God's weakness. In the weakness of God, revealed in Jesus who wept with Mary, who cried out in anguish, "My God why have you forsaken me?" who suffered in the face of sin and evil in his death upon the cross.

God's power is not a power to protect us from all that might go wrong. It is not a power that makes our suffering, our trials, and our tribulations go away like a genie in a bottle. Rather, it is a power that walks with us when things go wrong. That meets us in the midst of our suffering, our trials, and our tribulation. God's weakness meets us in our weakness. God's suffering meets us in the midst of our suffering.

Why do bad things happen? Any answer we can try to give is likely to fail to get at the full measure of the truth. Sure God may use the sufferings we endure to teach us things or to train us. God may even use them to help set our feet upon a better path. After all, God is a God who faithfully works all things out for good and who we can trust with the end of our story. A God who takes what is meant for evil and turns it for good. But in the midst of our circumstances what we need to know is that God is there and that we can cling to God's grace and to God's power – power made perfect in weakness meeting us in the place of our weakness.

This, I believe, is the good news that the Apostle Paul writes of when he says: It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who

indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No! In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.