

Why Do Bad Things Happen?

Job 2:1-10

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January 13, 2019

2One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. ²The LORD said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the LORD, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' ³The LORD said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.' ⁴Then Satan answered the LORD, 'Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. ⁵But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.' ⁶The LORD said to Satan, 'Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.'

⁷ So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

⁹ Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.'
¹⁰But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

The first call came one Labor Day Weekend from one of my co-workers. Had I heard the news? Bobby and his family had taken a trip to Florida for the holiday weekend. Totally unexpectedly, Bobby had dropped dead in their rental condo. And now the extended family, also church members, were scrambling to get to Florida to get a grip on what had just happened to their family.

Bobby had been a professional soccer player. He had recently retired from playing and was now the color commentator for the FC Dallas television broadcast. He was in great

physical shape it seemed. But something had obviously gone wrong. And now, there was a 35-year-old widow and two young boys who were without a husband and a father.

The second call came almost three years later. I had just walked in the door around suppertime when a call came from our music director. He said, “I just got a call from Richard’s sister-in-law. If I understood her correctly, she said they have taken Richard to the hospital. And I think she said he might be dead.” He had been taken to a hospital about 45 minutes from my house. By the time I arrived, the worst had been confirmed. Richard was indeed dead. And there in the family room of the ER were two friends of Richard’s, my two colleagues, and me. Richard’s family, it turns out, was in California.

Richard had been a sports writer for ESPN. He had been rapidly climbing the ranks and was now their beat writer for the Texas Rangers. Earlier that week, Richard’s family had flown to California to see family and were expecting Richard to join them later in the week for some family time at Disneyland. But now, the plans had changed. Richard’s wife, four-year-old son, and two-year-old daughter weren’t heading to the Magic Kingdom. They were heading back to Dallas for a memorial service. And to add another layer to the sadness, we soon learned that Richard’s wife was about 12 weeks pregnant with their third child – something they had planned to announce upon their return from California.

The memorial services for Bobby and Richard were two of the largest funeral services I have ever been a part of...and two of the most difficult. It was difficult to watch these two young, now single moms grieve. It was even more difficult to hear the questions of the kids. “Is Daddy in that box?” “Are they putting him in the ground?” But the most difficult part of each of these services was trying to make sense of why these two good men in the prime of their lives were suddenly gone.

Bobby, it turns out, had developed a heart condition. It was this condition that proved fatal that morning in Florida. Nevertheless, I’ll never forget what was said at his funeral. “Oh, the medical doctors might say that Bobby had a bad heart. But, that’s not true. Bobby had a good heart.” And you could see it in the way he lived his life, in the way he loved his

family. These were not just nice platitudes said to honor the newly deceased. Bobby really was one of the good guys.

So was Richard. He was a devoted family man and an incredible friend to many, including me. He was so down-to-earth, even when he would have to excuse himself from lunch to take a call from Nolan Ryan. Although he had a busy career, he was a regular in the church choir and was an active leader in several ministries of the church. But, now he was gone unexpectedly. That summer afternoon, he collapsed while walking to the gym. The autopsy to determine if it had been a suspected brain aneurysm had been inconclusive. But, learning the exact cause of his death wasn't going to change the new reality that Richard was gone. Like Bobby, almost three years earlier, another good guy was suddenly dead. And two families were now broken in unimaginable ways.

Today we begin a series called *FAQ – Frequently Asked Questions*. For the next seven weeks, we are going to tackle some frequently asked questions about life and faith. And here's what I can promise. Attempting to answer one question will lead to more questions. That's how it works in the life of faith. A growing faith seeks understanding...and that means more questions. This morning, the question in front of us is the one that echoed in so many minds – including mine – after the deaths of Bobby and Richard: Why do bad things happen to good people?

This is a reality that has confronted all of us. Bad things happen to seemingly good people. Good people are suddenly diagnosed with terminal cancer. Hard-working, dedicated employees unexpectedly receive a pink slip. Devoted parents discover that their kid has a genetic abnormality that will require life-long care. Brilliant minds are afflicted with Alzheimer's. Good people are injured in car accidents or lose their possessions in a house fire. Oh, there is no shortage of examples of calamity striking those who don't deserve it. The hard part is knowing how to make sense of it...and how to view God as a result.

Many of us grew up with an image of God as an all-wise, all-powerful parent figure who would treat us as our earthly parents did, or even better. If we were obedient and deserving, God would reward us. If we got out of line, God would discipline us, reluctantly but firmly.

God would protect us from being hurt or from hurting ourselves, and would see to it that we got what we deserved in life.ⁱ Anyone who has been a parent can relate to those actions. That's what parents do for their children.

But when the child is good and bad things happen, it messes up our understanding of God. Isn't there supposed to be a reward for good behavior? Doesn't it make better sense for bad things to happen to bad people? This mindset then leads us to one of three conclusions, all slight variations of the same thought.

The first conclusion we draw is that, maybe, the good person wasn't really that good after all. Maybe he or she were just putting on a show, but elsewhere in life, they weren't really as "put-together" as we thought they were.

The second conclusion is to give neat, tidy answers about what God is really doing: "God needed them in heaven." "He's in a better place now." "God doesn't give anyone more than they can bear." Unfortunately, these well-meaning phrases suggest that God has selfish needs or that God is just a puppeteer, pulling the strings of human life. It suggests that no movement is left to chance. There is no effect God didn't cause. Like puppets on a string, people have no free will.

And the third conclusion is perhaps the most common. It's the way in which people have tried to make sense of the world's suffering in every generation. It's the assumption that we deserve what we get, that somehow our misfortunes as humans come as punishment for our sins (Isaiah 3:10-22; Proverbs 12:21).ⁱⁱ We see this thinking play out in scripture. Since the earliest days of the bible, suffering was an occasion for self-examination and reflection. Many pointed to suffering as a sign of punishment for the wicked, a warning for the ethically unsteady, or a form of educational discipline for the morally immature.ⁱⁱⁱ

These were the conclusions that were leveled at the main character of the book of Job. Our scripture reading this morning tunes in to Job's life in mid-agony. In the first chapter, Job is described as a righteous and blameless man. Yet, in a meeting of the heavenly council, the satan – the accuser – suggests that Job is the way he is because of all the blessings God has given to him. Take those things away, the satan suggests, and Job won't be so righteous

and blameless. And so, in three quick hammer blows, Job suddenly loses everything: livestock, servants, and means of transport. Worst of all, a great wind blew down his house killing all ten of his children. All that he has is suddenly gone. Yet, Chapter 1 ends with a distraught and lamenting Job still offering words of blessing to God.

Then, in the text read for us a moment ago, a second test is heaped upon Job. Again, in a meeting of the heavenly council, the accuser suggests that Job is still able to bless God because his loss hasn't been personal enough. But, if Job's own body – his own skin – is in the mix, then surely that will affect his righteousness. Given that so much of a person's identity is invested in their skin and that diseases of the skin evoked social revulsion in Job's day, surely this will cause Job to crack. So poor Job is afflicted with loathsome sores from head to toe. And in his painful anguish, he finds himself sitting in a pile of ashes with nothing more than a broken pot to scratch himself with. Nevertheless, he persisted. Job still did not curse God for his misfortune.

If you were to read the next 27 chapters beyond our scripture lesson this morning, you would find dialogue between Job and his three “friends” about just what had happened to him. One-by-one, they come by to offer some of the conclusions we listed a few moments ago. Maybe Job wasn't actually as good as we thought he was. Maybe this is just a drama in which God is sadistically delighting in Job's misfortunes. Maybe, Job is being punished or being taught a lesson for some sort of ill behavior. Over and over, Job's friends offer him this kind of nonsense counsel.

So, what do we do with Job? As Virginia Woolf once wrote to a friend, “I read the book of Job last night. I don't think God comes out of it well.” What do we do with these scenes that seem to suggest that Job's misfortunes are the result of a bet between God and the satan? We have to first understand the genre and style of the story. The story of Job has a “folk story” motif to it. Or better described, it functions as a parable.

Much like the parables that Jesus later told, the story of Job was designed to tell us something about God. As John Holbert puts it, “Job is a drama whose ultimate subject is the nature of God. It, of course, wrestles with suffering and struggles against simplistic ideas

about God and the world, but at the heart of the matter is the deeper struggle concerning who God may be.”^{iv} The images of God found there are suggestive rather than literal. Throughout the tests of chapters one and two, and throughout the dialogue between Job and his friends, God is clearly represented to be king of the universe. But, rather than seeing God as a puppeteer, the story of Job is designed to help us to see that perhaps God is more of a stage director than a puppeteer.

Stage directors work with actors. Actors must learn a script. They must be trained in the art form. They can take cues or reject them. They can heed the director’s command or do something completely different. Such is the case with God. God has complete control over every aspect of production, but God chooses to work with actors who have a mind and a will of their own. God expects them to know the script(ure) by heart and to intuit God’s mind from hours and hours of practice. Yet, no matter what forgotten lines or errant improvisations or outright deviations from the script take place, God is directing the action towards a certain outcome – the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of God, where he will reign forever and ever.^v

Today in the twenty-first century, if we were struck with Job’s calamities, our temptation would be to act - to solve these problems on our own. Here in America today, we wouldn’t just sit on the ash heap complaining about our misfortunes. No, we would “get over it” and “move on.” We would get a good lawyer to help us recoup some of our losses. We would focus on reinventing ourselves. Perhaps we would get in a new line of work – one with more potential than land and cattle. Perhaps we would find a new spouse – someone more supportive who understands us better. Perhaps a therapist to help us deal with the grief would be in order. We would find new friends since the old ones were of no help at all. We would work day and night, keeping at it until we are on the top again.^{vi} The bad things that happened to good people like us can be overcome, we think, with enough work and enough help.

Yet, this is not the story we find in Job. What Job points out to us is that there are no easy answers. We can’t solve it all on our own. We can’t always make sense of what

happens. There is always an unexplainable element in suffering. Job gives us the words to articulate this dilemma of faith: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” Life is full of both good and bad. There are no guarantees of happiness and bliss.

But what the story of Job also points to is hope. After all the back-and-forth between Job and his friends about why he suffers, God weighs in. There is no happy ending, at least one that would appeal to most of us. Instead what happens is that God appears in a whirlwind, describing the difficulties of human ingenuity; the difficulties of human fallibility; the difficulties of human free will. And in Job 42, the story concludes with Job still in dust and ashes, but with a new understanding of God – not as a Divine Puppeteer like his friends thought, but as a Divine Stage Director.

Oh, Job was full of questions. Chapter-after-chapter describe him wrestling with what has happened. Oh, Job was full of sorrow and sadness. Chapter-after-chapter detail his lament. Yet, Job held on. He held on to his relationship with God with integrity. He didn’t place conditions on his loyalty to God – “you do this and I’ll respond accordingly.” He held on to the fact that even in the midst of his loss, he had not been forsaken by God. And the proof of that is that, despite all of his misfortune, despite all of his questions, God showed up.

Perhaps the key to this, I think, is in how God showed up – in how God spoke to Job. God spoke to Job in a whirlwind. In the storm of Job’s life, God spoke through the storm. Now to be clear, God doesn’t just speak in storms, but the reassuring thing is God does speak in the storms. It means that the storms aren’t a sign that God has forgotten us.

The greatest sign of God speaking to us through the storm is Jesus’ answer beneath a darkened sky and a trembling earth with his life, his blood, and his love. Jesus felt all the hurt, all the pain, all the tears, the agony, the emptiness, the loneliness, all the hurt of people. While we can’t always explain the suffering, we know that we have a God in Jesus Christ who knows all about suffering. And we know that in his resurrection, we also have a God in

Jesus Christ who is there when we hurt...when we are confused...when the questions outweigh the answers.

So why do bad things happen to good people? Because bad things happen. Hundreds of decisions lead to a company's decision to downsize. Thousands of things lead to two cars arriving at an intersection at the same time. Infinite combinations of things lead to DNA abnormalities. Evil of all shapes and sizes abounds. Both good people and not-so-good people are caught up in these realities.

What the parable of Job reminds us is that while life doesn't offer any guarantees, God is not sadistic. God is love. God shows up when bad things happen to good people like Job. And God shows up when bad things happen to not-so-good people as well. God also spoke to Job's doubting friends, offering them a pathway to redemption. The truth is, wherever we are in our faith journey between the doubters and Job, God has shown up in Jesus Christ. The power of good has overcome the power of evil. In Jesus Christ, we have the certainty that nothing can separate us from God's love.

Near the end of Ernest Hemingway's book *Farewell to Arms* he writes: "The world breaks everyone, and then some become strong in the broken places." And when bad things happen to good people – and they will - that's the only thing we can really do. We can hang on. We can bank our faith in God who knows reality. We can trust that God knows our despair and our suffering. And in that assurance, we can become strong. And, out of that strength we can look for others who are broken...and we can love them.^{vii} We can show up.

ⁱ Kushner, Harold S. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Avon Books, 1983.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Newsom, Carol A. "The Book of Job" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. IV*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

^{iv} Holbert, John C. "Just Who is God Anyway? Reflections on Job 1:1, 2:1-10" in Patheos. 2015. <https://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Just-Who-Is-God-Anyway-John-C-Holbert-09-29-2015>

^v Divine puppeteer

^{vi} Suomala, Karla. "Commentary of Job 1:1; 2:1-10" in *Working Preacher*. 2012.

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2669

^{vii} Howell, James C. *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. July 21, 1996. http://day1.org/890-why_bad_things_happen_to_good_people