

When Bad Things Happen To Good People

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Job 1:13-22, John 9:1-5

First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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¹ Jesus and his friends are on the way down the street and they see a familiar sight – a blind man sitting by the side of the road. Perhaps he was begging; perhaps he was just sitting quietly. Something prompts the disciples, however, and someone asks, “Lord, why was this man born blind? Is it because of his own sin, or that of his parents?”

The disciples see a man with an obvious disability and immediately assume that *someone* is being punished. The question is, *whose fault is it?* In that day and age, everybody knew that stuff like this doesn't just *happen*, it comes from God. Why?

The disciples, like most Jews of that time, believed that suffering and pain were signs of God's punishment. After all, they'd read in the book of Numbers that God does not leave the guilty unpunished, and that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. A narrow interpretation of that and other verses leads to a worldview that I might call transactional, or cause and effect. You do this, you get that. If you've got that, you must have done this. It's neat and tidy and it makes sense to us. Good things come to good people. Bad things follow bad people.

That's the kind of thinking that led people like Pat Robertson and John Hagee to proclaim that when hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, it was the wrath of God being poured out on that city because of its exceptional sinfulness. And

¹ *Healing the Man Born Blind*, El Greco, 1570

while some of us may snicker at that level of theological sophistication, when someone says, “Oh, wow... My dad has lung cancer...”, do you immediately ask, “Was he a smoker?” Because if a smoker gets cancer, well, maybe that person deserves it...right?

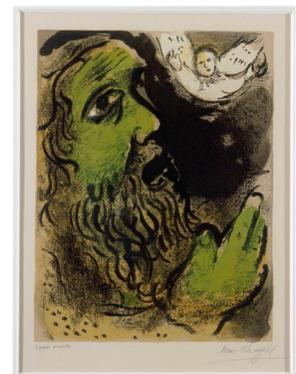
To be clear, there is a connection in the Bible and in real life between what we do and what happens to us. Choices have consequences, and often we do experience a great deal of pain because of our actions, or the actions of those who are close to us.

I saw this first hand when I was visiting South Sudan in the midst of their civil war, and often would pray with pastors from that nation who would begin a prayer with a time of confession in which they named to God the human tendencies toward greed and power-mongering and violence that had led this young nation down a difficult path.

But saying that war is a result of human sinfulness is not the same thing as saying your house was destroyed by a missile because you are such a pathetic sinner, isn't it?

That seems to be Jesus' point when he says bluntly, “Nobody sinned here. This man's experience doesn't have anything to do with an individual's sin. This man was born to display the power of God.” Sometimes things happen that you don't deserve.

²This story from John's Gospel reminds us of our ongoing experience with Job. If there is one thing we have learned in the past few weeks, it's that Job is a good, good guy. He takes care of his children; he's smart with his money – heck, even God almighty (someone who ought to know a thing



² *Job Praying*, Marc Chagall 1960

or two about being good) is always bragging on Job.

And yet...horrible things happen to Job. You just heard about some of them. His oxen and donkeys are rustled away by the Sabeans, who also killed the hired men. The sheep and their shepherds were destroyed by a massive lightning strike. The Chaldeans swooped in and carted off all of his camels, killing his servants in the process. And if all of that weren't bad enough, well, all of his children and their families perished when a great windstorm came and knocked down the house in which they had been celebrating.

And if the facts of these events are not enough, the author of Job emphasizes how bad it is by alternating his description of these tragedies: an invading army followed by a natural disaster followed by an act of war followed by a natural disaster. Job is hammered on every side – both humans and, it would seem, God, have turned against him.

Moreover, there's another clue in the language of the book. On Wednesday night, we considered the references in the text to words and phrases associated with consumption: in chapter 1 we hear that the children are eating and drinking three times. The donkeys are feeding, and the hired men and servants are all destroyed by the "mouth" of the sword. The fire from heaven "consumes" the sheep and shepherds. For Job, it is as if calamity has been personified and is now coming to devour him.

What will he do?



³Look at Job's response to this outpouring of evil and suffering in his life. First, he embraces fully the grief that accompanies loss and pain. Following the cultural norms, he shreds his clothing and

³ Job 2, Oldřich Kulhanek (1940 – 2013)

shaves his head. He laments the tragedies that have befallen him, and mourns openly and genuinely.

Remember that, friends, the next time that some horrible thing happens in your life and you feel like you just need to fall down and weep. You can do that. And if some knucklehead comes up to you and says, “Hey, hey, hey... remember ‘the patience of Job’? Come on, now, buck up, things will get better...” You can remind them that the first thing Job did when he suffered the affliction of his worst day ever was to fall to pieces in loss and in pain. There is no reason to feel as though you need to be ashamed of your pain or sorry for your grief. Own it. Express it. And move through it. It’s yours.

And *after* he cries out in grief and pain, *then* he falls on the ground and worships. “Naked I came on the day I was born, and naked I will be when I die,” he says. Note here that his first language of worship is subjective – it is about him. It is rooted in his own experience. That makes sense – it is the experience that he knows best. But then he leaves the subjective and moves into the objective realm: “the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away... may the name of the Lord be praised.”

Job’s experience (which has changed over the course of his life) gives way to Job’s identity (which is fixed). Job is a child of God. Job is created in the Divine image. Job encounters suffering as he encountered joy – in the company of his heavenly Father.

In fact, I would suggest that in his suffering, Job knows more of what it means to be made in the image of God. Author Gerald Janzen points out that “the agony of Job, in body and spirit, is his participation in the agony of God” that is demonstrated in the first half of chapter 1.⁴

⁴ *Interpretation Commentary on Job* (Atlanta: John Knox, p. 41), 1985.

And you say, “Hold on a minute! It sounded like Pastor Dave just said that God suffers in the book of Job! I didn’t see that coming!”

Neither did Pastor Dave. But think about it. Who is the first person to suffer in the book of Job? It’s not Job. By the time that Job has gotten around to putting up “Lost Oxen” posters, cleaning up the ashes of his flock, and planning his children’s funerals, God has already experienced a number of losses.

The heavenly dialogues that we’ve already read tell us of creatures who turn their backs on the creator. They speak of a God who loved that which he had made so much that he was willing to invest it with a measure of freedom – and so the Satan is at liberty to wander through creation and cause disruption, turmoil, and grief. God loved the Satan enough to listen to him; God watched Job suffer; The Almighty opened himself up to questioning and doubt and risk and distrust – from those to whom he had given and for whom he had nothing but love.

Does God suffer in the book of Job? Look at it this way. Job’s children were snatched from him in death. That is horrible – and yet at least Job could console himself by thinking it was a tragic accident. Yet those whom God had created and loved – the Satan and his followers – spit on God and walked away themselves. It was no accident. It was willful disobedience, and surely cut right to the heart of the One who had given them life.

When Job suffered the loss of his livelihood and the death of his children; when Job entered into the deepest pain he might have imagined – then Job knew more of the heart and image of God than he had before. And at the same time, he flung himself into conversation with that God in the hopes of receiving solace and comfort from One who knew what it meant to experience grief and loss.

Why did Job suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? I'm not sure. But I believe that God's presence is revealed in Job's suffering just as much as Jesus said it could be revealed in the life of the man who was born blind.

I would further suggest that, at the end of the day, asking "why" bad things happen is not always the best thing we can do. Sure, it makes sense to approach some of the difficulties in your life this way: why did you lose your job? Was it because you were 15 minutes late every day and made crude comments at the holiday party? Then maybe there's something to be learned.

Why did your girlfriend drop you? Was it the way that you ignored her or the fact you didn't 'feel like' going to her grandmother's funeral with her? When things in our world hurt, it makes some sense to reflect on them to see whether there may be some causality.

But a more important question is, "Now what?" The job is lost, the relationship ended, the diagnosis received, the funeral is over. What will you do as you look to tomorrow?

Perhaps we can learn from the example of a man called Martin Gray, who was in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II and was one of only two people in his family to survive the Holocaust. After the war ended, he married and settled in France. Years later, his wife and children perished when a forest fire consumed their home. This renewed tragedy pushed Gray just about to the breaking point, but he found hope and comfort in creating a foundation that sought to prevent forest fires.

Many of his friends urged him to file lawsuits and seek to hold someone accountable for his grief. He refused, saying that such a course of action would only focus on the past, and on pain and sorrow and blame. Filing suit against someone else or the government would, he said, put him in an adversarial position – a

lonely man becoming lonelier by seeking to hold someone – anyone – accountable. At the end of the day, he concluded that life has to be lived *for* someone and something, rather than *against* something.⁵

Who sinned that this man was born blind? Why did Job's children perish? Why did those things happen to your mother, or at his job, or in that class? I don't know.

But now that these things *have happened*, what will we do? Can we come together as God's people in grief and lament, and approach God in worship? Can we learn from our brother Job?

I know that if you have not yet experienced significant loss, pain, and suffering, you will. You are human. Why do all of these things happen? I can't tell you how to connect all of those dots. But I know Someone who is here to help you through it. Someone who knows something about loss and grief and separation and pain. Thanks be to God, that Someone is as close as your next prayer. Amen.

⁵ From a story told by Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.
<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/when-bad-things-happen-to-good-people/#>