

When Bad Things Happen To Good People

A Practical Sermon

by Charles B. Hodge, Jr.

Why do bad things happen to good people? This question bothers us. On occasions it overwhelms us.

My mother called me one morning rather upset. A lady who was just a tad younger than me and had been raised just across the cotton patch from me had died. Her story was a tragic one. Her dad, ravaged by cancer, had taken months, yea, years, to die. Her young son was also diagnosed as having cancer and had died only a year ago. One day last week her husband came home from the hospital. The doctors said he was terminal with cancer. Overwhelmed by it all, seemingly, she took an overdose of pills and died.

Bad things happen to good people. Here was a young lady who had lost her dad, her boy, and was about to lose her husband. Why do bad things happen to good people?

An Iranian proverb says, "If you see a blind man, kick him. Why should you be kinder than God?" That is the way the Islamic, the Moham-medan, and the Iranian look at God. They believe God is to be blamed, that God is sinister, peevish, and the author of suffering.

The book of Job contains forty-two chapters, but God gives no answers. John 9, the story of the blind man, contains forty-one verses, but Jesus gives no answers. If God gives none and Jesus gives none, Hodge has none. Easy answers are no answers. Pat answers are wrong answers.

I. THE FACTORS

Why do bad things happen to good people? *Factor one is the word sin.* Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death; . . ." Genesis 3:3 said, "Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die." After healing a man in John 5:14, Jesus said, "Sin no more, lest a worse thing befall thee." Exodus 20 says the sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children three or four generations. Things happen today that great-grandpa caused. Bad things can be the result of sin. Bad

things are sometimes consequences.

Let me sound a caution, however. Do not twist natural events into divine judgments. Go back to John 9. As the disciples walked by, their eyes fell upon a blind man. The disciples said, "Did he do it or did his daddy do it?" Jesus, with one sweep of the brush, said it was not the man or his dad. Case closed. This was for the glory of God. Many of us would spank ourselves, sometimes without mercy, over something we did not cause.

The second factor is a world of freedom. We are living in a world of freedom. Adam and Eve had the choice of sinning and they did. The wages of sin is death. Therefore, we are living in a world of sin and death. We are our own worst enemies. I still say 95 percent of the bad things that happen to us are our fault. I am using the word our not in an individual way, but in a collective way about man.

Take the San Francisco fire. It was terrible! People died. The city collapsed. More damage, however, was done by cheap, shoddy construction than by the earthquake or the fire. People say, "That was an act of God." Because of man's own greed, unnecessary death and destruction were caused. It is our freedom to be human. Pain is essential to life. You ought to be thankful for the ability to have pain. That is in you. That is a part of humanity. Pain is the price of life.

The third factor is old man nature. In Matthew 5:45 the Bible says it rains on the just and the unjust. Can you imagine how silly the world would be if good and bad men affected the laws? Here is a precious little two-year-old grandbaby. He sticks his hand in a fire. God up in heaven says, "That is an innocent child, so that fire will not burn him." Thus the child is okay. Then an old dirty sinner sticks his hand in a fire and God looks down and says, "That is a dirty old sinner; he will be burned." So he gets his arm burned off. Here is a little baby who falls out of a twelve-story window. On the way down one of heaven's

angels says, "That is a good child; I will catch him." What a crazy world this would be if every action was determined by the goodness of the people in it. So the world is impartial. Fire is fire. I do not care if it is an accident; I do not care if it is on purpose. That is the law of nature. Little babies get run over by trucks. A child in Waco wandered away from his home and is lost. You say, "What kind of a God is this?" God did not send that little baby off from the house where he could not be found. That is the law of nature.

The fourth factor in the problem of human suffering is Satan himself. Write down his name. I do not like it when insurance companies say a certain event that happened is an "act of God." They ought to call it "an act of the devil." Call it what it is. Keep God out of it. In Job 1 it was Satan who said, "I want to get Job." Satan did it. Second Corinthians 12 says the thorn in Paul's flesh was sent by Satan, not by God. Do not say, "Why did God do it?" Look old Satan in the eye and say, "Why did Satan do it?"

The fifth factor is God. Hebrews 12 says God chastises, disciplines, and spansks as a loving father corrects his children. Romans 11:22 says, "Behold then the goodness and severity of God: . . ." In Galatians 6:7 the fundamental of all time says, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Forgiveness cancels the guilt of sin but not the consequences of sin. If a person robs a bank and gets shot, God will forgive him if he repents. But he is still going to bleed if he is full of shells. Many do not want forgiveness. They just want God to remove the pain and consequences. The man who violates has to live with the consequences of that violation.

II. THE LESSONS

What lessons are learned when bad things happen to good people? *Suffering is a testing ground.* We find out what we are made of. I did not know about Houston. They played Baylor, S.M.U., and Texas. The only team that really played them well was T.C.U., and T.C.U. could not beat them. I still say they are not basketball players. They are just some of the greatest athletes on earth, and their athletic ability just overrules their inability to play basketball. I was interested today because I thought, "Okay, they are playing the big boys." You do not find out

what you are made of when you are playing four-year-olds. When you get up and play the Yankees in baseball, the Cowboys in football, and Philadelphia in basketball, you find out what you are made of. How did Job find out about himself? In a trial. When Abraham reached up with that dagger in his hand to kill his precious son, not only did God know, but Abraham knew.

James says, "Be ye thankful when ye fall into manifold temptations." Why? They will make virtue, faith, and patience. Muscles are built by pumping iron. More and more weight is added to make more and more pressure. It comes with effort. That is why you either become bitter or better. In Psalms 119:71 David said, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I may learn thy statutes."

One man dies and another lives. The survivor will say, "God was on my side," won't he? If he could, the dead man would yell out from the grave, "Where was God?" Do we believe in God or do we believe in healing? A man says, "I prayed to God and my child died; I do not believe anymore." He did not believe in God; he believed in healing. When God ceased to heal, he ceased believing. It is one thing to believe in God and another to believe in healing. We must believe God is love in disappointment as well as in blessing. Do you say, "My faith is stronger in God"? If so, why? "There were five people and three got killed. My husband was among those who lived. I believe in God," you say. What about those whose loved ones died? Can they not believe? Is God good to you and bad to them? Use a trial as a steppingstone or it will become a stumblingblock.

The second lesson is that faith determines how we perform. What we learn from pain depends upon the faith we brought to that pain. Do you believe afterwards? You had faith prior. Do you now deny? If you do, then you had no faith prior. If you had a misconception, a little faith, a wrong faith, then a trial will expose your faith. Only human beings can find meaning in pain. It is hard to say, but it is nonetheless true—the best things in life are the result of wounds. That grade you worked the hardest for is the grade you cherish the most. That marathon you won in which your body ached and literally exploded as you ran the 26 miles is the greatest thrill of your

life. It is so because it involved struggle. If you want patience and pray for it, you may receive more trials. We pray, "God, give me patience," and He knocks us flat on our backs. We say, "That is not exactly what I meant. I wanted it in a bottle. I wanted to read about it in a book." You say, "I want wisdom." How do you get wisdom? By getting old. You make many mistakes, but that is how wisdom is gained.

The third lesson is that bad things happen to good people. It is not winning *over* suffering but winning *through* suffering. What is the difference between a masochist or a martyr and a believer? A masochist takes pride in hurting. Some of us enjoy hurting. Some of us do not feel good unless we feel bad. We like that crutch. You say, "Woe is me. Poor little old me. I perhaps have more pain than anybody else in town." You get your kicks out of your hurts. That is not a believer. A believer does not enjoy a kick. A believer learns in his pain. He learns what really matters. He learns what has priority. He learns the great lessons that only come in suffering.

The fourth lesson is that when bad things happen to good people, praise God. That is a hard one, but it is biblical. Job won. He lost all of his children; he lost all of his possessions. But he said, "Naked came I from my mother's womb and naked shall I return." In all of this Job neither sinned nor cursed God. Then what did Job say? He said, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." Paul had a thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12). Oh, it bothered him—mentally, spiritually, and physically. Three times he said, "I sought God to remove it and God said no." Then what did Paul say? "I learned about grace—'My grace is sufficient unto thee.'" So Paul said, "Thank God for thorns."

III. THE ADVICE

What advice can I give when bad things happen to good people? *First, keep the character of God clean.* Do not go over to a person at the cemetery or at the hospital and say, "Buck up. This is the will of God." He has had just about all of the will of God he can handle. God did not do it. If a man loses one of his four children, do not go up to him and say, "Everything is okay. You have three other children." If the man had a hundred children and he lost one, it would hurt. Keep the character of God clean.

Psalm 105 says, "God is good." If God is good, then nothing else matters. If God is not good, then nothing else matters. "Know ye the Lord; He is good."

Wham! Something happens to you and well-intentioned brethren come over and say, "Is God trying to tell you something?" I have had people say, "I did not do this and I did not do that. I just believe that God took my child." That is superstition, not faith. Faith is 1 Peter 5:7: "Casting all your anxiety upon him, because he careth for you." Keep God clean.

Accept what you cannot change. Many of us are beating our heads into a wall that will not move. I am not twenty anymore. I can have a facelift; I can take vitamin E; I can lay in a whirlpool bath for sixteen hours. But I am still not going to be twenty again. That is just all there is to it. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul says, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear." We sometimes say, "Nobody has ever had it as I have had it." Oh, no. We are wrong. Other people have had leprosy. Other people have lost their children. Other people have been ravaged by this or that. There is not a thing in tomorrow's newspaper that will not be in the next day's and year's newspaper. If the old world keeps spinning, a hundred years from now the same tragedies will be in the paper. There will always be an obituary column. Such is common to man.

Other people became great facing what I am facing. Some of the greatest people I have ever known are blind. Do you remember brother Burford at Abilene Christian University? He knew the campus better than his dog did. He could make shortcuts. He worried his neighbors to death. His hobby was woodworking. He would have the saws going on at night without the lights on. It bothered the neighbors. They told him, "Turn the lights on and run the saws. When you get through turn the lights off, and we will know you are all right." He used to mow his yard with a power lawnmower. Remember Beethoven? He composed his best music as a deaf man. He never heard his music. It was only in his head. You can become great. Other people have. This is the privilege of being a human being.

Change what you can. Consider these three truths about how God works. God may change the situation. He could have removed the thorn from Paul. He did not but He could have. Some-

times God changes me. That is what He did with Paul and the thorn, didn't He? He said, "Paul, I will not change the thorn; I will change you." Sometimes God changes the situation and sometimes He changes you: There is a third alternative: Sometimes God lets us climb the mountain. Moses was eighty years old before he ever got to go up on the mountain. Some tragedies are not irreversible; some heartaches can be healed.

CONCLUSION

I do not have any answers. If God does not and Christ does not, then I do not. But I want to

share this with you: Self-pity is out! There is never a time for self-pity. It would have been wrong with Job. It would have been wrong with the blind man. It is wrong today. When bad things happen to good people, we should keep self-pity out. If you do not, you are down.

I will make this proposition. When you give me the answer to the problem of good, I will give you the answer to the problem of evil. Why would God be good when we are the way we are? Why would God send angels to hell? Why would Jesus die on a cross for me? When any man explains to me the mystery of good, I will explain to him the mystery of evil.

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