

When the Innocent Are Wronged

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Many of our problems, we bring upon ourselves. However, we may have other problems because we are the victims of wrongdoing. A person may become a victim in a number of ways. Thieves may break in and steal his household goods. He may be mugged. He may be unfairly fired from his job. He may be the victim of malicious gossip. He may be wronged in a business deal or cheated out of his inheritance or lose his savings in a crooked scheme. He may experience prejudice, being despised because of his physical or mental characteristics. He may be the victim of a car accident caused by a drunken driver.¹

WHY DO SUCH THINGS HAPPEN?

When a good person is wronged,² the first question that is likely to come to mind is “Why?” He may ask, “Why me, Lord? I have tried to do Your will; why would You allow such a thing to happen to me?” Christians may even ask, “Why, Lord, do You allow evil people to do wrong to good ones and not be punished for it?”³

Various answers could be given to that question.⁴ Among them, the following two are most

significant for our purposes:

1. *Being wronged by someone is not necessarily a result of our own sin.* While sin sometimes has painful consequences in this life, not all misfortune is the result of the victim’s sin.⁵ Job had done nothing to deserve the wrongs he suffered from marauding Sabeans and Chaldeans (Job 1:15, 17). Throughout history, God’s faithful servants who died as martyrs give evidence that people who are victims of wrongdoing are not necessarily guilty of doing wrong themselves.

2. *When we are victimized by wrongdoing, it reflects the fact that there are evil people in the world.* “The world has never had a shortage of evildoers.”⁶ In New Testament times, Herod the Great (Matthew 2:16), Pilate (Luke 13:1, 2), and Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1, 2) were all rulers who murdered innocent people. The Jews by “wicked hands” (Acts 2:23; KJV) crucified Jesus, stoned Stephen (Acts 7:57–60), and persecuted Christians (Acts 8:1–3). Even in those days there were murderers, thieves, evildoers, and troublesome meddlers (1 Peter 4:15).⁷ According to Paul, the world would get worse, not better: “But evil men

¹People may also be victims of others’ unintentional actions—as in traffic accidents—or of their own mistakes. Further, people also suffer because of natural disasters like hurricanes or tornadoes. Such experiences obviously cause problems, but they are not dealt with in this lesson.

²In other lessons in this series, we have begun by asking if we ourselves may be at least partly responsible for the problem. In this lesson, we are assuming that the “victim” is innocent and has been wronged by another.

³The psalmist asked similar questions in Psalm 73, as did Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1:13).

⁴Answers to the question “Why do the innocent suffer?” are given in Coy Roper, “If There Is a God, Why Does He Allow So Much Suffering?” *Truth for Today* 11 (February 1991): 7–10. This lesson is also available online

at http://www.biblecourses.com/english/en_lessons/EN_199102_02.pdf.

⁵Of course, all human beings are sinners because we all sin (Romans 3:23; 5:12). Further, everything that is bad in the world can be traced to Adam and Eve’s sin—so all misfortune is, in one sense, the consequence of sin. However, an individual’s misfortune is not necessarily the result of a particular sin he or she has committed.

⁶Jack Wilhelm, “The Hurts Caused By Others,” in Jack Wilhelm and Bill Bagents, *Easing Life’s Hurts* (Florence, Ala.: Cox Creek Bookhouse, 2001), 71. He added that “the term *evil doer* is used at least seventeen times in the King James Version of the Bible” (Ibid.).

⁷See also Luke 10:30; 23:18, 19. Paul listed some of his troubles in 2 Corinthians 11:23–27.

and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:13). In a world filled with evildoers, we should not be surprised when we are sometimes wronged.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Of course, even if we can find an answer to the question "Why?" we have not solved the problem itself. What can we do when we have been victimized?

First, we must not abandon God. Christians are tempted, when problems arise, to leave the church. During the first century, some fell away because of persecution (Matthew 24:9, 10). Disillusioned disciples may even blame God for their misfortune and consequently resolve to serve Him no longer. A child of God cannot afford to make such a decision; if he does, he cuts himself off from his greatest source of comfort. Further, to forsake God in such circumstances allows the one who wronged him not only to harm him in this life, but also to put him on a path to hell!

The premier example of how we ought to act when we experience losses is Job, who, deprived of everything, cried out, "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). James, writing to Christians who were experiencing persecution, cited Job as an example of "patience" (KJV) or "endurance" (NASB) in James 5:11. When we suffer because others have wronged us, we must—like Job—be steadfast and remain faithful.

Second, we must not retaliate. The Bible forbids Christians to seek personal revenge.⁸ Paul wrote, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19).⁹ In fact, instead of taking revenge against our enemies, we are taught to love and pray for them) and to do good to them (Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:20, 21). When we refuse to retaliate, we will be following in the footsteps of Jesus, who "while being reviled, . . . did not revile in return; [and] while suffering, . . . uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him

⁸The law of Moses also forbade personal retaliation (Leviticus 19:18). "An eye for an eye" defined the penalty that was to be exacted by the justice system; it did not authorize personal revenge.

⁹See also Proverbs 24:29; Matthew 5:39; Romans 12:17, 20, 21.

who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23).

Desiring revenge is almost as natural as breathing. Nevertheless, Christians must resist the temptation to avenge wrongs. Novels and movies make heroes out of people who boldly avenge themselves in order to maintain their "honor." According to biblical teaching, *getting revenge is not an honorable act!* We must avoid it.

*Third, we should inform the authorities.*¹⁰ Turning the matter over to the law is not seeking vengeance; rather, it is asking God's appointees to do what God intended for them to do: to bring "wrath on the one who practices evil" (Romans 13:4). Paul sought protection and vindication from legal authorities (Acts 16:37; 25:11).

Why should we report our victimization to the proper authorities? Here are two reasons: (1) *Because of our love for others.* If we follow the command to "love [our] neighbor" (Matthew 22:39), we do not want others to be victimized. If a criminal is put in jail, he cannot harm others. (2) *Because we love the person who has done wrong.* Since we are told to "love [our] enemies" (Matthew 5:44), we will report evildoers. Love does what is best for the one loved, and *it is not best for a criminal to get away with his crimes.*¹¹ It is best for him to get caught and to be punished; perhaps then he will turn from sin and become what he ought to be.

Fourth, we should try to put our losses in perspective. When I was in high school, my prize Duroc sow died. My dad helped me to view that loss in a different way by saying, "You couldn't have lost the sow if you didn't own it in the first place." Sometimes our losses bear tribute to how much God has blessed us.

Bible commentator Matthew Henry, after being robbed, wrote in his diary,

Let me be thankful. First, because I was never robbed before. Second, because although they

¹⁰Popular culture perpetuates the myth that we should not "betray" our friends when they have done wrong. Such an idea may be typical of gang members, but it is not found in the Bible.

¹¹Congregations sometimes find themselves in the embarrassing position of discovering that members are guilty of crimes against the church or against other members. For example, a church treasurer could steal funds from the treasury, or a teacher might abuse children. What should the church do in such a terrible circumstance? The answer in a particular case might not be easy, but the elders should take into consideration what is best for all concerned.

took my wallet, they did not take my life. Third, because although they took my all, it was not much. Fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.¹²

God would approve of our seeing losses from a spiritual perspective. Jesus said not to fear “those who kill the body” but to “fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). He indicated that the soul is worth more than all the world (Matthew 16:26). Paul put earthly gain in proper perspective when he said, “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8; see 1:21–23).¹³ In other words, whatever we lose, we still have much reason to rejoice if we do not lose our souls!

Fifth, we must always do what is right. To live righteously is essential—especially in the event of slander. Peter wrote, “Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds . . . glorify God in the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:12).

Sixth, we must get rid of negative emotions. When we are treated unfairly, misused, lied about, or injured financially or physically, it is natural to be angry. Perhaps the first rule to remember about our emotional reactions to problems is that we need to give ourselves, as Bill Bagents said, “permission to be angry.”¹⁴ He went on to say, “Unfairness should make us angry. Anger, in itself, is not a sin (Ephesians 4:26–27).”¹⁵ Of course, we must not let our anger lead us to sin. We cannot express our anger in sinful ways, nor should we hold on to the anger until it becomes bitterness (Ephesians 4:31). However, if we do not admit our anger and communicate it to someone, the anger is likely to remain within us and produce a festering wound that causes other problems.

We must do our best to rid ourselves of the anger, bitterness, and discouragement that being

¹²Michael P. Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989), 376.

¹³Other passages which suggest the need for a proper spiritual perspective are those which deal with the blessedness of persecution (Matthew 5:10–12; James 1:2, 3).

¹⁴Bill Bagents, “Career Jolts,” in Jack Wilhelm and Bill Bagents, *Easing Life’s Hurts* (Florence, Ala.: Cox Creek Bookhouse, 2001), 177.

¹⁵Ibid.

a victim causes. To do so is difficult, but it can be done. The ultimate aim should be to forgive the person who committed the wrong. Let us make three observations about this forgiveness:

(1) We do not have to wait until the wrongdoer repents to forgive him. The examples of Jesus (Luke 23:34) and Stephen (Acts 7:60) demonstrate that forgiveness can and should be extended as soon as the harm is done.

(2) Extending forgiveness to the wrongdoer does not obligate God to forgive him. God forgives those who do His will. A criminal who remains unrepentant cannot expect God’s forgiveness—even if his victims have forgiven him.

(3) We need to forgive wrongdoers for our own sakes more than theirs. Holding a grudge—harboring hatred, bitterness, and resentment against one who has wronged us—does the perpetrator no harm; but it hurts us. Holding on to anger is harmful emotionally, physically, and spiritually. We need to forgive so that we can get on with our lives.

Overcoming negative emotions is difficult, and it may be harder yet to forgive a person who has wronged us. One helpful approach is to substitute positive thoughts for negative feelings. If we ask for God’s help in prayer, He will enable us to do more than we thought we could.

Seventh, we ought to look toward the future with hope. If someone has lost his money to a thief, had his reputation ruined by lies, or spent weeks in a hospital because of someone else’s sin, how can he have hope? For the Christian, hope comes from doing our best and trusting God for the rest. In other words, we must resolve that, whatever our circumstances, we will do our best to work toward a successful future. Any circumstances that we cannot control or prepare for, we must trustingly leave in the hands of God.

To “do our best” includes *trying to learn* from the disaster we have experienced. *We must not blame ourselves for the wrong someone else did!* Nevertheless, if the situation teaches us, for example, to be more cautious with our money, then something good has come of it. At the same time, we must guard against becoming cynical, suspicious, or paranoid because of a bad experience. There is no need to become a perpetual victim. Christians are to exhibit love, and love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7). To “do

our best” also means “*keeping on keeping on.*” When we have lost something, we should count our remaining assets. Among them might be our health and our ability to work. Successful people are those who do not let disaster defeat them, but keep coming back and working to achieve their dreams. We can do it!¹⁶

Above all, we need to trust in God. Psalm 37 begins, “Do not fret because of evildoers” (Psalm 37:1a) and then goes on to tell how we can keep evildoers from making us fret: “Trust in the LORD and do good; . . . Delight yourself in the LORD; . . . Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it” (Psalm 37:3–5).¹⁷ (1) *We can trust God to give us strength* to love and forgive our enemies and to “press on toward the goal” (Philippians 3:13, 14). (2) *We can trust God, who is sovereign over all, to bring good out of the bad things that people do.*¹⁸ He can work through all circumstances so that good will result (Romans 8:28). No matter what God allows us to suffer, He can and will use us to accomplish some good

¹⁶It may be depressing to have to start all over because of what someone did to us. However, starting over is better than doing nothing.

¹⁷Wilhelm, 75–81.

¹⁸Joseph’s brothers wronged him, but out of their wrongdoing God brought good (Genesis 45:4–7; 50:20); see also the story of Esther.

in the world. (3) *We can trust God to reward us,* after these days of trial are over, by giving us a home in heaven. (4) *We must trust God to punish evildoers*—if not on earth, then in eternity. God is the ultimate dispenser of justice. Even if we do not see justice done in this life, it will be done on the day of judgment!¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Anyone can become a victim. If we are not wronged for any other reason, we may be called upon to suffer “as a Christian” (1 Peter 4:16; 2 Timothy 3:12). When that happens, our faith will be tested (James 1:2–4). It is easy to remain faithful when the skies are clear and the winds are fair; it takes stormy weather to show us what kind of Christians we really are. When we are wronged, what will we prove to be: Christians who are true in word and deed, who trust in God and “keep on keeping on,” or quitters? Jesus said, “It is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved” (Matthew 10:22b).

¹⁹The Bible emphasizes that God is the one who ultimately avenges wrongdoing (Romans 12:19a; see also Acts 4:29 and its context). Christians can be comforted by the knowledge that ultimately God will punish those who do wrong (2 Thessalonians 1:6–9; see also the entire Book of Revelation).