

Rick Snyder
First Presbyterian Church
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When Bad Things Happen to Good People

Selections of Job

In recent months, subway billboards have appeared in New York City using an arresting message – “A Million New Yorkers are good without God. Are you?” A similar campaign was attempted on city buses in Bloomington, IN, but the city banned the ads as being too controversial. So the ACLU is bringing suit.

One of the originators of this campaign is a humanist chaplain from Harvard named Greg Epstein, who has written a book entitled, Good without God. He is trying to form a nation-wide network of atheistic congregations who will do good works, for he insists, “The religious do not have a monopoly on compassion, hard work or virtue.”

I find it ironic that Epstein is from Harvard. John Harvard, Harvard’s benefactor, was a clergyman and the word “veritas,” or divine truth, is on the university seal. And Harvard was founded to “advance learning, dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when present ministers lie in the dust. Harvard was founded to provide an educated clergy.

But Epstein is right. We can be good without God. Christians have no monopoly on virtue. Virtue results from many things – good role models, being raised in a loving family and a compassionate community, having experiences that help us mature – so some non-Christians are more loving and kind than many Christians. But hopefully we Christ-followers are growing daily in our love of God and neighbor.

And perhaps, if churches were more distinctive in our care and concern, in our passion to serve the hurting and the least of our brothers and sisters, maybe Epstein wouldn’t see the need to create atheistic congregations to do good works. Sadly we Christians today are increasingly viewed as being moralistic, homophobic and anti-intellectual. When a Pat Robertson declares that “Haiti got what it deserved because of an 18th century pact with the devil,” all of us are tarred with the brush of judgmentalism. The best defense against such characterizations is the counsel of Paul, *“As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another . . . And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them together in perfect unity.*

But when I saw Epstein being interviewed, I began to understand his atheism. He commented, "When I see a Haiti, I reject a God who allows such a thing to happen. It just doesn't make sense." And here's the elephant in the living room for our Christian witness and perhaps even our own faith. Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? Why should an earthquake strike the poorest of the poor? Why doesn't God answer our prayers when we pray so hard for a young man with cancer? Why are some people stricken, not only with misfortune, but with suffering that seems beyond all measure.

Outside St. Paul's Cathedral in London, there is a statue of Queen Anne. In the early 1700s, Anne bore 17 hemophiliac children, every one whom died in early childhood. As child after child was snatched from her arms, Anne became an alcoholic and hideously obese. And she abandoned her faith, refusing to believe in such a cruel God. So her statute faces away from the cathedral. Londoners laughed, "*Here is Queen Anne, left in the lurch; she faces the gin shops, and away from the church.*" How could one woman endure so much?

We expect life to be difficult, but we do not expect heart-rending unfairness. It is this sense of injustice that led Rabbi Kushner to write [When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#). When Kushner's son Aaron was 3, he was diagnosed with progeria, rapid aging. Doctors held out no hope. They were right. Aaron died two days after his 14th birthday. In his book, Kushner pours out his utter dismay:

When I received Aaron's diagnosis, I felt deep, aching unfairness. It didn't make sense. I am a good person. I seek to do right in the sight of God. I live a far more religious life than many with healthy families. If God exists, if He is minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He do this to me?

Theologians call these questions the issue of theodicy. Classically stated, theodicy consists of four propositions: 1) God, if He is truly God, is all powerful, 2) God is totally loving, 3) But there is suffering and injustice in the world, So 4) Is God either not all-powerful or, more ominously, not totally loving.

We are not the first to grapple with these questions. In fact, 600 years before Jesus, an author struggled to understand seemingly undeserved suffering. Babylon had carried his nation into exile; her armies destroyed every city and village, razed the temple, killed priests, raped women and murdered children. Everywhere our author sees devastation, despair, and death. He agonizes at the scope of the suffering, and is also infuriated by the stupid thinking that passes for theology in his day. So he writes a book - entitled Job.

Job is pictured as a devout and moral man, religious, charitable, exemplary in every way. He has 10 children and 1000s of animals, evidently proof of God's blessing. But as God extols Job's faithfulness, Satan retorts, "Why not -- he's loaded. See if he remains faithful if he loses his possessions." "OK," says the Lord. "Just don't hurt him." So Satan goes to work.

Job is in his backyard grilling some camel steaks when the bad news arrives. A messenger runs up breathless, "Job, the Sabeans have stolen 500 oxen and they've killed your servants." A second messenger runs up, "Job, lightning has wiped out 7000 sheep." A third messenger runs up, "Job, the Chaldeans have stolen 3000 camels." This is more than Black Monday on Wall Street. This is the Dow Jones falling from 14,000 to 1.4 in 20 minutes. Job is ruined, but the worst is yet to come. A final messenger comes and gasps, "Job, a wind destroyed your brother's house. All your children are dead." Job falls to the ground sobbing, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Satan isn't finished. After reducing Job to bankruptcy and killing his family, he afflicts Job with a dreadful disease. Job is so shaken that he crawls to the village dump like a piece of trash, crying, "I curse the day of my birth." As Job laments, three of his friends, Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad, arrive. For our author, they represent the shabby theological thinking of the day. But they do one good thing. For seven days, they sit with Job, sharing his anguish. For the hurting need presence, not platitudes! It is when Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad open their mouths that they get into trouble.

So as Job pours out his grief, Eliphaz comments, "Now Job, you've instructed many with your example. . . but now trouble comes, and you're discouraged." Eliphaz is from the "turn your scars into stars" school of theology. Think positively! When the going gets tough, the tough get going! No pain, no gain! If life gives you lemons, make lemonade!

Eliphaz is partly right. We need courage and perseverance. Life is hard! It isn't always fair! Sometimes we must simply slog through the mire with patience and endurance. Sometimes call for dogged determination. And yes, suffering can strengthen us. It can sensitize us to others. Many of our most noble qualities are revealed in the face of suffering. But Eliphaz think about it, Job has just lost his fortune, his health, and all ten of his children.

Then Eliphaz makes it worse by lecturing, "Now Job, as I have observed, we reap what we sow." Great! Job is going down for the third time, and Eliphaz adds the anchor of guilt. Sure, we often reap what we sow. Abusing drugs shortens our lives; Tiger Woods and John Edwards have found out the costs of

stupid sex. The bank robber who wrote out his demand for money on the back of his business card, surprise, was caught!

But we can eat health food, practice yoga, moderate stress, and pray for peace, and still die prematurely. Evil isn't always punished, and good isn't always rewarded. The Psalmist may say, "The wicked will be destroyed, and the righteous will flourish." But these are probabilities, not certainties. Good does not always triumph this side of heaven.

Now Job's second so-called "friend," leaps into the fray. Bildad is an advocate of the "I'm a worm, you're a worm theology." He says, "Man is but a maggot." Same to you, Bildad. Thanks for the sensitivity! Yes, we're sinners, but we are created in the image of God, and adopted into His family. Christ's very coming tells us that we are loved and precious.

Zophar suggests praying harder. "Just stretch out your hands and you will be secure." But what of those times when we have prayed repeatedly and the divorce has been finalized, or our business has gone under, or the operation was unsuccessful. Our prayers have great power, but they are not always answered in the way that we wish.

What is Job saying? Perhaps first, don't confuse God and life. Life isn't fair. We live in a fallen world. It does rain on the just and the unjust alike. We have no guarantees. Life may give us a horrific accident, a disfiguring disease, the loss of our beloved spouse. An earthquake or tsunami may destroy our community . . . So why doesn't God stop these things? But what do we expect Him to do? To suspend the law of gravity if a child falls from a tree? To redirect a tornado if it heads towards a community? To flash a warning sign before we climb on board an ill-fated airline flight?

God doesn't seem to intrude very often in the flow of life. But He promises us His eternal presence to strengthen us and sustain us. So while we may curse life's unfairness, we need not lose faith. When noted Scottish preacher, A. J. Gossip lost his wife, he told his Aberdeen congregation the next Sunday, "People have asked me if my wife's death has caused me to lose my faith. For God's sake, haven't I lost enough without losing that too!."

What is Job saying? Perhaps second, don't blame yourself. Unless you brought suffering upon yourself by conscious sin, don't compound your suffering with unnecessary guilt. Job is a victim. He did not deserve his fate. I remember speaking with a man who was fired unjustly. He asked, "Is God trying to show me something?" My response, "Only that corporate life isn't always fair."

Third, but amid your suffering, look for small signs of God's grace. For many years, author Frederick Buechner struggled as the anniversary of his father's death approached. His father committed suicide, and Buechner remembered each agonizing moment of that long-ago day. One day in his devotions, Buechner meditated upon the cross. He pictured Jesus' anguish, and suddenly felt that Jesus was anguishing with him, that part of the pain Jesus was feeling was his pain. Buechner says that he was so moved that he wept. Now as that anniversary approaches, he pictures our Lord sitting beside him in solidarity, waiting with him, even weeping with him. Friends, when we hurt, our Lord hurts too.

But we must look for a moment beyond Job, for it is only in the New Testament that we find a more complete answer to our struggles with life's sometimes aching unfairness. For a more complete answer is found only in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Frederick Buechner discovered that in our most agonizing suffering, Jesus suffers with us. We do not suffer alone! The cross demonstrates that.

And further, our suffering has a horizon and a limit for we are an Easter people, a people of resurrection. Amid his personal suffering, amid persecution and a painful "thorn in the flesh," the Apostle Paul calmly assures the Corinthians, "We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary afflictions are preparing for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

I've often been asked, "Why did God take this person?" My response is that "God did not take the person; He received him into eternal dwellings." And isn't that what we most need to know. If we've lost a loved one, if our community has collapsed in a pile of rubble, no theological answer can suffice. What we want is the companionship, once again, of the people we love. And that is what God promises us in Jesus Christ.

Friends, if in your life right now, you're feeling like Job, do not lose heart. God has not and will not ever abandon you--not in this life, not in the life to come. We are not promised that life will be easy, simply that we will never walk alone.