

WHY DO GOOD PEOPLE SUFFER?
The Bible Asks and Answers

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Has it ever seemed to you that life is terribly unfair at times? Have you ever noticed that often the best people seem to have the most trouble? Oftentimes the men and women who are most respected and best-liked in a community, the men and women who take their religion seriously and who honestly try to live up to the best that they know are the very ones who seem to have more than their share of illness or misfortune or tragedy. Why? It is one of the most perplexing questions that the human race has ever faced, and men and women have been searching for an answer since the beginning of civilization.

The Bible wrestles with the problem of suffering. From the beginning to the end we find references to it. The men and women of the Bible sought an answer to this hounding question, and through their experience, through their own suffering, God spoke to them and answered their questioning. It took many, many years for God to bring his children to a deep understanding of the meaning of suffering. Down through the years of Biblical history men caught a glimpse of truth here and there, but it was a long time before the truth shone clearly in Jesus Christ. That is why we find a variety of attitudes toward suffering in the Bible. I hope you noticed that the three scripture readings included in our service this morning present different answers to our question: Why do good people suffer? Think back to the words of the First Psalm, which we used for our responsive reading. It is a very good statement of what was the most widely accepted philosophy of Old Testament times, that good people prosper and evil people suffer.

The Lord knoweth the way of the righteous:
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

It was taken for granted in the Old Testament days, that if you were righteous, God would bless you by granting you health, prosperity, and peace. This was assumed to be true not only of individuals, but also of the nation itself. If the nation were prosperous, it was assumed that the nation had been righteous. If tragedy befell the nation, the cause was assumed to be some national sin. This sounds fair enough, doesn't it? It appeals to our sense of justice. The good prosper, the wicked suffer. So be it. But you and I know in our own experience and in the experience of others, that it simply isn't true. We can't agree with the author of the First Psalm or the author of the 37th., who went so far as to say this:

I have been young, and now am old;
Yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken,
Nor his seed begging bread.

You and I have seen the righteous forsaken, the millions who have innocently suffered as a result of the wars of our century, to take one terrible example. And even in times of relative peace we see the same thing happening, the innocent suffering, the righteous confronting tragedy. We see that, as Harry Emerson Fosdick has said:

A rapacious man prospers, a generous man suffers tragedy;
needed people die young, worthless scoundrels reach a ripe
old age; some children are blessed from birth, others are
cursed with idiocy or disease; of two families of like
quality and conduct, one experiences habitual good fortune,
the other continuous adversity.

It strains our sense of justice to see what happens in this rough old world of ours, and we demand a deeper answer to the problem of suffering than that given by the author of the First Psalm. Men of the Bible demanded a deeper answer, too. There were among them men who realized that the facts of experience did not uphold the theory that the righteous always prosper and the wicked always suffer. Perhaps the author of the Book of Job was one of the first. The Book of Job is a drama, and if you want to get the full impact of its message you should read it through at a sitting, even if you have to skim parts of it. The first two chapters of the book are the prologue to the drama, and in them we are introduced to the main characters:

God and Satan, who are having a little argument over Job's character, Job's three friends, and Job himself, a man who "was blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil." God gives Satan permission to test Job because Satan has said that of course Job is a righteous man. Why shouldn't he be. He is prosperous. THOU HAST BLESSED THE WORK OF HIS HANDS, AND HIS POSSESSIONS HAVE INCREASED IN THE LAND. BUT PUT FORTH THY HAND NOW, AND TOUCH ALL THAT HE HAS, AND HE WILL CURSE THEE TO THY FACE.

God doesn't believe it, so he gives Satan permission to take Job's possessions, his family, and finally his health. When the first act of the drama itself opens, we find Job afflicted with a disease which has covered his body with ugly sores from head to toe. He is sitting on the village dump, scraping his sores with a piece of broken pottery. Onto this scene come his three friends, who assure him that there is a simple explanation for his predicament. He has sinned. That's the orthodox teaching, and it must be true. But Job isn't so orthodox. He is the one who has the sores! He firmly maintains his innocence, and he does something else. He complains to God. He complains bitterly, crying out: LET THE DAY PERISH WHEREIN I WAS BORN! He even accuses God of dealing him an injustice. Now, we may think that Job was wrong in complaining to God, that he should have borne his suffering without grumbling: but at least from the standpoint of psychology, Job did the right thing when he gave vent to his feelings, when instead of keeping his bitterness bottled up inside of him he released it in a torrent of words.

God wants us to tell Him our problems, and I don't believe He holds it against us when we honestly can't see the sense of what's happening to us and tell Him so. Well, what finally happened? Did Job get an answer to his questioning? The closing chapters of the book declare that the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, saying:

Who is this that darkens counsel
by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall
declare to me.
Where were you when I laid the
foundation of the earth?

And then the Lord goes on to question Job about the mighty powers of nature, asks him if he understands the mysteries of creation.

Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords
of Orion?
Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, that a flood of
waters may cover you.
Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go and say to you,
'Here we are'?

My professor of Old Testament at the theological seminary told us, "God didn't answer Job. He overwhelmed him." That's just about it. Job didn't find an intellectual answer to his questions about his suffering, but he did have a tremendous personal experience of God, which humbled him and made him realize that he had no right to judge God. The great poetic drama of Job draws to a close with this confession of the central character:

"Then Job answered the Lord: I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, But now my eye sees thee, Therefore I despise myself, And repent in dust and ashes."

Strictly logical, purely intellectual answers are not to be found to all of life's pressing questions, and perhaps if we could find them, they would not satisfy us. We need an answer that appeals not only to our minds, but to our hearts, to the very depth of our being. Suffering touches us deeply, and an answer to our suffering must touch us just as deeply.

The only satisfactory answer to the question, "Why do good people suffer?" must come through a personal religious experience. When we really know God, we look at our suffering differently. We no longer see ourselves as the center of everything. We see God at the

center and ourselves and our sorrows as an insignificant part of the total meaning of life. We are humble, and like Job, we repent. Yet it is only natural that we should want some further light on the problem of suffering, and that further light shines brighter than the sun in the New Testament. When we come to the New Testament, we find a radically new approach to the problem of suffering, an idea far different from the traditional attitude held by the writer of Psalms I and 37 or even by the writer of Job. Suffering took on a new meaning for the men and women of the New Testament, because they interpreted it in the light of the cross on which Jesus died. Do you see why the Cross made such a difference? Jesus surely was the best man who ever lived. If anyone deserved a life free from suffering surely it were he. If it were true that the righteous always prosper and the wicked always suffer, then Jesus would have prospered. If we can look at the tragedy which befalls a man and see it as evidence that he has sinned, then Jesus must have been the chief of sinners. But he was Innocence and Purity at their highest. And his reward was a crown of thorns and the nails of crucifixion. The next time you see tragic circumstance overtake a person and you are tempted to say it is because he has sinned, stop to think of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus himself denied that suffering is a mark of unrighteousness. He and disciples happened to pass one day a man who had been born blind. The disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him." And Jesus healed him. Jesus sealed his teaching with his own suffering and death, and then a most remarkable thing happened. The men and women who had lived closest to Jesus began to see in the death of Jesus the proof of his great love for them and indeed of the love of God himself. The Cross, the symbol of suffering and shame, became the symbol of a triumphant Christianity. I do not believe that God wanted Jesus to die on the cross. God wanted to win his children to Him by the life of Jesus, not by his death. God's plans were foiled by evil and thoughtless men. But God was able to take their evil and make something good come of it. He was able to transform the cross from the symbol of defeat and sin into the symbol of victory and love.

Leslie Weatherhead, the minister of City Temple in London, who has, through his writings, helped many to gain fresh insight into this problem of suffering, illustrates this truth with the story of how a Persian rug is made. The rug is put on a frame, and little boys sit on various levels working on the rug on the back side. The artist stands on the front side, the side which people are going to see, and shouts his instructions to the boys on the other side. Sometimes a boy will make a mistake. He may put in a wrong color. Dr. Weatherhead was watching this process one day while he was travelling in Persia and he asked someone, "What happens when the boys make a mistake?" "Well," came the reply, "Quite often the artist does not make the boy take out the wrong color. If the artist is a great enough artist, he weaves the mistake into the pattern." The artist weaves the mistake into the pattern. God did that on Calvary. He does it today with the sufferings of his children. As St. Paul, who knew intense suffering himself, said: IN ALL THINGS GOD WORKS TOGETHER FOR GOOD WITH THOSE WHO LOVE HIM. God can make good come out of suffering. Many people will testify that in an hour of physical or mental anguish life took on a new meaning for them. Perhaps they will tell you that in such a moment they found God. In an hour of suffering, they experienced the very thing Job did. I HAD HEARD OF THEE BY THE HEARING OF THE EAR, BUT NOW MY EYE SEES THEE.

There are many aspects of the problem of suffering we have not even touched upon this morning. One of them is the nobility of suffering which is voluntarily undertaken for the sake of others. This is redemptive suffering, the kind of suffering which Christ himself experienced. Perhaps this sermon has not helped you to find an answer in your own mind to the question: "Why do good people suffer," but I hope and pray that it will encourage you to think of suffering in the light of the Cross of Jesus Christ, and in your own hours of suffering to look to Him, who said, "IN THE WORLD YOU SHALL HAVE TRIBULATION, BUT BE OF GOOD CHEER; I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD."