

What Does God Say When Bad Things Happen?

*"I have told you all this so that in me you may find peace.
In the world you will have trouble. But courage!
The victory is mine; I have overcome the world."
John 16:33*

Disasters shake us up. The indiscriminate loss of human life, sudden and unexpected, always raises soul rending questions and uncomfortable emotions. It is a scandal to us that God allows both natural and man-made horrors. The very nature of evil is irrational; it doesn't make sense to us. And so, in our hearts we wonder how to put together what we are taught about a loving God and the many awful things that happen to people, maybe even to ourselves.

I don't know if there is any easy way to answer that question because God himself only answers some questions with an invitation to know him more deeply. The best way I can think of to explain that is in the context of a loving relationship between parent and child. Of course, we know that a parent's job is to instruct and form their children in the way they should live and there is much to guide and teach through every stage of development. Yet, there are some questions a wise parent will respond only with, "Please trust me with this." What you most need to know right now is that I am here for you with all the best I have to give.

For many of us, that seems a most unsatisfactory answer, but when a child has learned they can trust their parent he or she will more readily accept and trust again without knowing the whys and wherefores. The same holds true for our spiritual growth and our relationship with God. There are times when God will only respond, "Trust me." Many times over the years, through my own trials, I have cried out to God in frustration, "This time, God, I want a real answer!"

Why is it that we don't believe the call to trust is a real answer? Besides all the issues of control and independence and self-sufficiency, I believe the issue is a relational one. It's hard to love someone you don't really know. And it's harder still to trust someone you don't love. When God refuses to answer our questions with "real answers" it is because he is looking to draw us closer to him, to know who he really is and not who we think he is. He is a relationship God and he knows that genuine, loving relationships are the key to finding meaning and hope. Sometimes understanding comes later, sometimes not, but always his intent is to build relationship with us.

Job is something of a role model for me. Not that I seek the suffering he knew, but even though he felt God was being totally unfair, he still refused to curse him. Something happens to Job through a deeply personal encounter with God. God never did answer Job's question as to why innocent people suffer, but whatever happened between them was enough for Job. This is what Job says, *"Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know...my ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you."* (Job 42: 3, 5) As Job stood before his God he was humbled. Out of that flowed true worship, thanksgiving and healing. This inspires me to pray, "Lord, help me to seek you in all honesty and without bitterness so that I can say that I have seen your goodness with my own eyes."

Certainly, as a good parent would, God wants us to mature in our understanding and knowledge of Him and our world. Through his written Word he gives us insight into his own nature and the origin and nature of man and of evil. In the entire universe, we are told that our earth was chosen to be a place where love would reign. The Creator and the creature were to live in a marvelous intimacy that made the angels of heaven marvel and the fallen angels despise.

Genesis reveals that something was broken in the heart of mankind through its assertion of self-sufficiency. The protective covering of God's love was lost.

The consequences from that one act of rebellious disobedience and mistrust are mind-boggling. The damage is so great that only God himself will be able to undo it. We can understand why God makes such a big deal about sin because it brings alienation, separation, and death. Scripture doesn't spare us the gory details. Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, murdered his brother, Abel, in a fit of jealousy. Mankind has not stopped killing since. Sin is the real enemy. It is the root cause for every evil. It is the reason why suffering and death entered the world. Somehow, through that first sin, all of creation was changed as well; vulnerable to the same destructive forces that

man had opened himself up to. It seems the earth, too, groans and rumbles under the weight of sin it witnesses and suffers from.

In our desire to understand why bad things happen we may be tempted to lay responsibility on those who are victims - maybe God is judging them. Jesus challenged a similar mindset in his day, "*Do you suppose that those eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will perish.*" (Luke 13:4-5)

Jesus, always a respecter of all life and keenly aware of the immediate needs of those around him, addresses the greater issue of the eternal fate of every man and woman. Physical death is an enemy, but not your greatest enemy. He says to those who will hear - live fully in this world I have given you and take care of each other, but be mindful too of your origin and destination. Take God and your need for him seriously.

God never really answers why he allows evil to occur. Rather, he asks a few questions of his own: "Will you be a part of my answer to this broken world? Will you accept your own need for a Savior? Will you comfort those who mourn? Will you extend mercy to those in need of mercy? Will you use your power wisely (meekness)? Will you root out all sin in your own life? Will you hunger and thirst for what is good? Will you bring peace into your encounters with others? Will you remain faithful when you are persecuted for seeking justice and speaking truth?"

Those who believe and follow the Lord will always and in some way be a part of bringing hope and help to those who suffer, because that is where God wants to be. Up close and personal.

Prayer

It has been said, God, that you whisper to us in times of peace and shout to us in times of tragedy. O Lord, give me ears to hear and eyes to see what you are up to when all hell seems to break loose. Help me to meet you where I am and let your love grow in me. Teach me that I can trust you no matter what is happening in me or around me. Let my life bear witness to who you really are that others might be blessed and drawn to know you for themselves. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.