

“ ‘I Curse the Very Day that I was Born!’ A Man Named Job and the Dilemma of Why Bad Things Happen ”

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Scripture

Selections from Job 1 and Job 2

“There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east...

The Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.’ Then Satan answered the Lord, ‘Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.’ The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, all that he has is in your power...’

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home... They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great...

After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. Job said: ‘Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, A man-child is conceived.’ Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it... Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?’”

Sermon

“There is only one question which really matters: why do bad things happen to good people? All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting... Virtually every meaningful conversation I have ever had with people on the subject of God and religion has either started with this question, or gotten around to it before long.

Not only the troubled man or woman who has just come from a discouraging diagnosis at the doctor’s office, but the college student who tells me that he has decided there is no God, or the total stranger who comes up to me at a party just when I am ready to ask the hostess for my coat, and says. ‘I hear you’re a rabbi; how can you believe...’ - they have one thing in common.

They are troubled by the unfair distribution of suffering in the world. The misfortunes of good people are not only a problem to the people who suffer and to their families. They are a problem to everyone who wants to believe in a just and fair and livable world. They inevitably raise questions about the goodness, the kindness, even the existence of God.”

So reads the opening paragraph of, *“When Bad Things Happen to Good People”* by Harold S. Kushner.

And just so you know, this question was not at all an academic one for the good Rabbi, who lost his only son at age 14, following a slow degenerative disease, which he and his family had to endure for more than a decade.

Kushner’s introduction then leads into a discussion of some of the many ways others attempted to comfort him, in totally unsatisfying ways.

First our misfortune is somehow deserved - a punishment from God for our sin. And our scriptures (unfortunately) are certainly full of verses where God rewards the righteous and punishes the evil.

Secondly, is that God sends these difficulties as a way of testing our faith? Or that God has sent us this difficulty in order to teach us a very important, if not hard, lesson. Maybe this is the only way to get it through our thick skulls, But since God’s ways are unknowable, we won’t understand until later why we’re going through difficulties now?

And finally, suffering is what actually earns us our final reward, if not in this life, but in the life to come (pie in the sky, by and by).

But Rabbi K. thinks that we are asking the wrong question. Maybe God does not cause suffering at all, maybe suffering happens for reasons other than that God wills it?

First he quotes Psalms 121,
*"I lift my eyes to the hills from where does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, maker of Heaven and Earth."*

We should not be looking to God to find the source of our pain and suffering, but looking to God as a source of help!

This refocusing of the question, according to Rabbi Kushner, is best illustrated, by the Story of a man named Job.

As we heard earlier, Job was a very good man. So righteous was he that God boasted about his devotion. God was so confident in Job that God gave Satan permission to test him with every manner of unfortunate events.

First, all of Job's wealth was stripped away, followed quickly with the violent deaths of all his children! Eventually, even his health was taken away when his body became covered with sores from head to toe.

The best advice that anyone could give him, "was to curse God and die!"

And so great was Job's suffering, that he not only began to curse the very day that he was born but even the very moment of his conception!

So disfigured was he by his great affliction, his own friends did not recognize him!

It appears that he was literally brought into the valley of the shadow of death, and death is what he now longs for.

Now the story of Job is one of the oldest stories in our Bible. What I mean, is that it had likely be told throughout the ancient Middle East for thousands of years before this edition was finally written down.

An unidentified author, took that original story and adds a long (nearly 35 chapter) poetic dialogue between Job and his friends.

It is a challenging and yet honest dialogue, similar to how a group of Rabbis might discuss God's role in human suffering from various viewpoints.

Job's friends are trying to "comfort" Job as they discuss the finer points of what would have been their contemporary theology.

But unfortunately, it is was the prevailing wisdom of their day that actually got in the way and fails to be sufficient for Job's needs. Eventually, Job began to start blaming God for his misfortunes, calling the Divine out and demanding God to provide an explanation.

Well, surprise, surprise, surprise! (as Gomer Pyle used to say) God did show up and... well... gave Job a piece of his mind!

From out of a violent windstorm, and sounding a bit peeved I might add, God lays it out for Job in Chapters 39 and 40.

"Who are you to question my wisdom with your ignorant, empty words? Now stand up straight and answer the questions I ask you. Were you there when I made the world? If you know so much, tell me about it.

Who decided how large it would be? Who stretched the measuring line over it? ...I marked a boundary for the sea and kept it behind bolted gates. I told it, 'So far and no farther! Here your powerful waves must stop.'

*Job, have you ever in all your life commanded a day to dawn?
...Have you any idea how big the world is? Answer me if you know... Have you ever visited the storerooms, where I keep the snow and the hail?
...Have you been to the place where the sun comes up? ...Can you tie the Pleiades together or loosen the bonds that hold Orion?" (The Good News)*

And what a surprise when a very different kind of Job responds...
"I spoke foolishly, Lord. What can I answer? I will not try to say another word. I have already said more than I should." (The Good News)

Loose paraphrase, "I'll just sit down now and shut up now!"

In order to understand what the author is trying to tell us, Kushner directs us to three statements that he feels each of the characters in the story want to believe:

- A. God is all powerful and causes everything that happens in the world, or that nothing happens good or bad without God willing it.
- B. God is just and fair, and really does want everyone to get what they deserve or that the “good” prosper and the “wicked” are punished.
- C. Finally that indeed Job is a good and just individual.

“As long as Job has his health and wealth,” Kushner points out, “we can believe all three” simultaneously without difficulty.

But he adds, “When Job suffers... we have a problem. We can no longer make sense of all three propositions together. We can only affirm the first two by denying the third.”

Job’s friends immediately decided to stop believing in “C!” Since Job is suffering, he obviously did something to deserve it. “Tit for tat,” was the prevailing wisdom of their “day.”

But most unfortunately this idea is still prevalent in our day.

Job, on the other hand rejects proposition “B,” that God is always fair and just.

For Job, God is all powerful and thus the Divine is not limited by anything even to what is considered fair and just.

We may think that Job’s confidence in his own “goodness,” could be an example of the sin of pride, but to be fair, the story began with God bragging about Job’s righteousness.

Rabbi Kushner also poses several prickly questions regarding the necessity of God’s fairness;

“Can we say logically that an all-powerful God must be fair? Would God still be all powerful if we, by living virtuous lives, could compel God to protect and reward us?”

“This view would resign God to being a cosmic vending machine, we insert the correct number of tokens and get what we want! (With the option then of kicking and cursing at the machine if it doesn’t discharge what we paid for?)”

Kushner suggests that the storyteller picks a third option;

The author, “believes in God’s goodness and in Job’s goodness, and is prepared to give up the belief that God is all powerful. Bad things do happen to good people in this world, but, perhaps it is not God who wills it. God may want people to get what they deserve in life, but God cannot always arrange it.”

According to Kushner, the author lays this out in what he calls, “the most important lines in the entire book;”

“Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor. Pour out the overflowings of your anger, and look on all who are proud, and abase them. Look on all who are proud, and bring them low; tread down the wicked where they stand. Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below. Then I will also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can give you victory.”(NRSV)

Kushner’s paraphrase sums it up nicely:

“if you think that it is so easy to keep the world straight and true, to keep unfair things from happening to people, you try it. God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even God can’t bring that about.”

Now this can be a hard thing to accept especially if you were raised to believe in an all-powerful and very judgmental kind of God who metes out to us exactly and only what we deserve.

But if God is also a God of justice and mercy, a self-limiting God, who submits Divine power to Divine justice, then God can also be on our side when bad things do happen.

And, if God knows us and weighs our intentions, as well as our actions, then God may not want to punish us at all, but forgive and love us?

So, if our misfortunes are not God’s desire for us, we can then, in the midst of our struggles, turn to God for help as we suffer.

Our questions can then change from, “God, why are you doing this to me?” to, “God, you can see what’s happening - please help me!”

This change can then free us to turn to God for help, strength and comfort, rather than turning away in fear of judgement and punishment.

Changing the question can also change our focus.
Rather than fussing with God in our anger,
we can start looking at ourselves and on what we can do.

Since a great deal of suffering in this world is due to injustice,
a better use for our anger would be to actually join our efforts with
those of God, who is also angry with and wants to end injustice.

Knowing that God is with us and reaches out to us with compassion,
will most likely lead us to become more compassionate as well.
And compassion can also be spread like a pandemic!

I am convinced that God does really desires only the good for us.
God also desires a relationship with us.

Suffering, pain, struggles and trials in this life can change us in many ways
(both for the good and for the ill), but they can never separate us
from this relationship - not unless we choose to turn away.

And whenever something bad does happen,
God is there, God is with us!
No more, no less but always more than enough!

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