

GOD IS GOD, AND YOU'RE NOT

Job 42:1-6

We can respond constructively to tragedy.

A sermon preached by
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Zan Holmes, Jr., is a retired United Methodist pastor and former host of the Disciple I Bible Study videos. He tells a story about a Bible class in a church where they were sharing their favorite Bible verses with the pastor. Finally, one elderly and uneducated man got his turn to share. He said, "Well, I've got a lot of favorite passages that I like a lot, but there's one that has helped me the most. In fact, it is five little words that are found all over the Bible: 'And it came to pass.'"

The preacher asked the old man to explain why that was his favorite verse. The old man said, "Don't you see? When the Bible says, 'It came to pass,' that means that it did not come to stay. During my life many troubles have come, but thank God, they did not come to stay. Instead, they came to pass."¹

I'm not sure Job knew that his troubles had come to pass. I am sure it didn't seem that way at the time.

Do you remember the story of Job? He was a righteous and wealthy man, owning lots of land and livestock. He had seven sons and three daughters, and they all got along. A miracle in itself! Job had it made. Job's wealth and faithfulness really irritated Satan, so he asked God for permission to afflict Job and test his faith. Satan in this story is not the lord of all evil, but more like a heavenly being who always has a contrary opinion—sort of a devil's advocate, if you will.

God allowed Satan to test Job, as long as Job's life was spared. So in a matter of days, foreign raiders destroyed Job's livestock and crops. All his children were killed at once when the house they were in collapsed on them. Then Job was afflicted with sores so bad all he could do was sit in the ashes, scrape his skin, and grieve for his losses. This sounds horribly unjust, but remember, this is a story told to set up a discussion of the question.

Job's wife, seeing his suffering, encouraged Job to curse God and die. Now that's helpful. Job refused. Then three of his friends showed up, and after sitting in silence for a week, they got in a theological discussion. For thirty-six chapters they argued the various

aspects of Job's condition. The entire time, Job maintained his innocence and demanded to see God face-to-face for an explanation of all his suffering.

Finally, God shows up and embarrasses Job with the shallowness of Job's power and knowledge. Job repents of his presumption. Our Scripture text today is the punch line of the story. Job says to God, "*I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ...Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me that I did not know. ...I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.*"²

Then the story concludes with God restoring the fortunes of Job, even more than he had before. This, of course, was so not the point of the whole story. Most scholars think the ending was added by a later editor who didn't quite get it.

Job is really a fable or a drama written to examine the most fundamental religious question of all. Why do the righteous suffer? Put another way, if God is good, why does God allow suffering in the world, especially innocent suffering? Or, as Rabbi Kushner said it a few years ago, why do bad things happen to good people?³

It's a question that can send you off into the ditches in a hurry. The suffering of the innocent can make you fall into the ditch of unbelief. It can make you want to give up on God. In fact, if you talk to many atheists or agnostics, they will tell you that a part of their rejection of God has to do with all the suffering in the world. How could God let all the bad stuff happen?

The United Nations reports that 12,300 children have died in Gaza since the war with Israel started last October. This is more children than the number who perished in all the wars in the world in the last four years combined.⁴ World Vision, a Christian relief agency reports that there are 45 million children on the planet suffering acute malnutrition, with a million innocents dying each year.⁵ Multiple relief agencies say that there is enough food to feed every human, but equitable distribution is prevented by poverty and displacement brought on by wars, disasters, and climate change. How can we believe in a God who would let that happen? How could there even be a God in a world of earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, and genocide?

In December of 2004, a massive tsunami in the Indian Ocean killed over 200,000 people. Columnist Eric Zorn of the Chicago Tribune, reflecting on the disaster, said, "I call my outlook indifferent agnosticism: I don't know if God exists, and I don't care. God's will and design for this temporal and spatial vastness, if any, is so patently, deliberately impenetrable that I doubt any mortal has a grasp on it."⁶ That's the ditch of disbelief.

You could also fall into the ditch of anger. Tragedies big and small sometimes just make us angry. We get mad at God, and that's OK. God can take it. Anger doesn't hurt God, but it gets us off in the ditch, detoured from our journey.

I'll never forget getting so mad at God when my friend Martha Anne Andrews died. She was a colleague in seminary—the smartest among us, and such a wonderful person. On the exam for graduate school, she made a perfect score. However, she went back to South Carolina to serve a church for a couple of years and start a family. Then she was going to return to Duke and get her Ph.D.

But on a dark night in South Carolina, Martha Anne and her husband and new baby rounded a curve, and a log truck was stopped in the road. Martha Anne and her little boy were killed. It was the day after her 30th birthday.

The night I heard about that, I was so mad at God. It was such a tragic waste of so much potential for the Kingdom. I walked outside my little church in southeast Arkansas and looked up at the starry sky and actually raised my fist and said, “Why? How could you do this?”

Almost immediately the answer came back to my heart, “I didn’t.” I knew that, but I was so mad.

The third ditch we fall into with tragedy is the ditch of guilt. Of course, we don’t take responsibility for natural disasters, but often with the more personal tragedies, we beat ourselves up over things we really can’t control.

In 2011, there was a horrible murder in a Hasidic Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn. Hasidic Jews are ultra-conservative and extremely religious, and their neighborhoods, even in New York City, are virtually crime-free. Leiby Kletzky was an eight-year-old boy who was being allowed to walk home from school for the first time. His parents had rehearsed the route with him. His mother was waiting for him to come down the street. What could go wrong?

Evidently Leiby got confused, took a wrong turn, and asked the wrong man for help. The day after police arrested the man who killed Leiby, a close family friend spoke with reporters while the Kletzky family prayed. “Why?” he said. “We don’t [know] that. ...What we know is that through Leiby’s death, God is sending us a huge signal—that we’re doing something terribly wrong. And we’re looking for what that is.”⁷

I remember reading about that and thinking, “Job’s friends!” It was the same argument they made 2,500 years ago. If all this bad stuff happened, Job must have done something terribly wrong, and God was punishing him. But he hadn’t. Job was innocent.

So how do we make sense out of senseless suffering? How do we stay out of the ditches of disbelief, anger and guilt? How can we stay on a positive path, despite the tragedies that afflict the human family? How can we have a productive journey, despite the troubles that burden our own lives?

First, when tragedy strikes, instead of turning away from God, turn toward God. Tragedy forces a choice. When you are afflicted, you can either turn away from God, or you can turn toward God. You can cling to God, or you can cast yourself away from God. Job suffered; he questioned; he doubted; he ranted at God. But he never dismissed God. He never gave up on his relationship with God. He knew that if there was an answer to be found, it would be found with God.

One time Jesus was teaching and shared some controversial ideas with the crowd—just once, right? Some of the people got angry and left. Scripture says, *“Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’”*⁸

In the midst of our suffering, our questions, our doubts, and our anger, if we will turn to God, we will find the words of life.

The second way to stay on the path is to understand the way the world works. Sometimes we operate under some false assumptions about reality. We seem to think that if we are faithful and religious and keep our noses clean, nothing bad will happen to us.

Has anybody read the Bible lately? It’s not a book about how good people avoided trouble. It’s about how God’s people endured and overcame their trouble by the power of

faith. Everybody in the Bible had trouble, and God provided the strength and courage to get through it all.

Adam Hamilton, pastor of Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, makes this comment: “The Bible definitely does *not* teach that those who follow God will have a life of bliss. It describes the dogged faith of those who continue to trust in God despite their suffering, and the comfort, strength, and hope they find in the face of suffering.”⁹

Another false assumption is expressed in the statement we hear so often, “Everything happens for a reason.” The assumption is that God makes everything happen that happens, and that the bad stuff is all part of his plan that we don’t understand.

Dr. Kate Bowler is a faculty member at Duke Divinity School, and up until 2015, she had a great life: a great education, a great job, a great family. Then she was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer, and her world fell apart. She survived, and she wrote a book called *Everything Happens For A Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved*.¹⁰ She wrote, “‘Everything happens for a reason.’ The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I’ve had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. I mean, no one is short of reasons. So if people tell you this, make sure you are there when they go through the cruelest moments of their lives, and start offering your own. When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.”¹¹

Saying that everything happens for a reason makes God the cause of all sorts of senseless, stupid, tragic, and evil things. It just isn’t so! Remember Romans 8:28; in everything that happens, God works for good, but God is not the author of evil. Seek a better understanding of the way the world works, and you’ll stay out of the ditches.

Finally, to stay out of the ditches and keep on the path, don’t lose faith. Even when you are confronted with tragedy, even when things don’t make sense, even when reality is painful and discouraging, don’t give up on God. Don’t stop believing.

Tony Blair was the Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1997 to 2007. He is deeply Christian, and sometimes he gets questioned about his faith. He is always straightforward with an answer.

In 1996, Blair made a visit to a school in Scotland where a gunman had killed 16 children and a teacher. In the bloodstained classroom, a close associate asked Blair, “What does your God make of this?”

Blair responded, “Just because man is bad, it does not mean that God is not good.”¹² Even when faced with tragedy and suffering, if we abandon God, we fall into the ditch.

Job never lost his faith. All of his struggle was done in the context of his relationship with God. In the midst of his argument with his friends, Job affirmed, “*I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.*”¹³ And so he did, when God sent his Son into the world.

When God finally came to meet with Job, God did not give him an answer to the question of suffering. In a nutshell, God said, “I am God, and you’re not.” Job didn’t get what he asked for, but he got what he needed. There will always be mysteries that we wonder about. There will always be questions that go unanswered. Baron von Hugel said, “The deeper we get into reality, the more numerous will be the questions we cannot answer.”¹⁴ That is the tension that leads to faith. That is the tension that requires faith to live.

Job never got an answer. Instead he got God. Kate Bowler finally came to this conclusion: “God is here. We are loved. It is enough.”¹⁵ When tragedy strikes, we do not have to fall into the ditch of disbelief, anger or guilt. We are able to turn to God, to seek understanding, and to keep the faith. Whatever comes to pass, this will be enough. It will keep us between the ditches.

¹ Zan W. Holms, Jr. “It Came to Pass,” *sermons.com*.

² Job 42:2-6.

³ Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* (Norwell, MA: Anchor Press, 2004).

⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147512>.

⁵ <https://www.worldvision.org/hunger-news-stories/world-hunger-facts>.

⁶ Eric Zorn, “Tsunami levels a challenge to all our beliefs,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 4, 2005.

⁷ Colleen Long and Tom Hays, “Man linked to slain boy to get mental exam,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, July 15, 2011, 4A.

⁸ John 6:66-69.

⁹ Adam Hamilton, *Why? Making Sense of God’s Will* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 5.

¹⁰ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens For a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018).

¹¹ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6623905.Kate_Bowler.

¹² Michael Elliott, “Tony Blair’s Leap of Faith,” *Time*, June 9, 2008, 34.

¹³ Job 19:25.

¹⁴ Author and theologian Baron Von Hugel (1852-1925), *PreachingToday.com*.

¹⁵ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6623905.Kate_Bowler.