

HOW COULD GOD ALLOW THAT TO HAPPEN?

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you

Psalm 13

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.

Romans 11:25-36

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has

ever given to God, that God should repay them?" For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Matthew 10:21-23; 26-31

"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes..." "So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

MESSAGE:

How could God allow that to happen? How many times have you heard people ask that question? How could a merciful God allow six million Jews to be murdered in the Holocaust? How could a loving God allow 140,000 people to be killed by a tsunami? If God is gracious and loving, why does he let his creatures suffer? He could stop it if he wanted to. Why doesn't he?

There is probably not one among us who hasn't asked this question at one time or another. People attempt to answer it in all kinds of ways. One answer is that of the atheist: God can't prevent bad things from happening because God doesn't exist. Whatever happens, happens: it's just the luck of the draw. Actually, that's what people really mean when they ask, "*How could a merciful God allow this to happen?*" They don't think there IS a merciful God because a merciful God wouldn't allow things like that to happen. In their minds, the existence of misery and suffering proves that there is no such thing as a loving God.

Of course the trouble with atheism is that it's neither logical nor empirically demonstrable, as Paul tells us in the first chapter of the Book of Romans: "*What can be known about God is plain to men because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.*" In other words, creation itself is evidence of a creator, just as the intricate order and design of life are evidence of a designer. Order and design don't "just happen": chaos is what "just happens." Order and design have to be imposed by an outside intelligence. So unless you believe that matter and energy and order all created themselves, you have to believe that they were created.

Creation implies a creator; design implies a designer. The evidence for the existence of a God is so clear and so abundant that the Psalmist wrote: "*...only the fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'*"

Another answer that perennially crops up is that there is a God but his powers are limited and He simply can't prevent bad things from happening. This was the theme of a book that was popular about thirty years ago entitled *"When Bad Things Happen to Good People."* The author of the book and his wife had lost a child and as they struggled to come to grips with how a merciful God could have let such a horrible thing happen, they ended up deciding that God would have prevented it, if he could, and so it must have been that He couldn't. If he and his wife had to choose between believing in an all-powerful God who would allow bad things to happen to people and a loving God who couldn't prevent bad things from happening to people, they would choose the latter. God could be either omnipotent or loving, but he couldn't be both. It's a tempting idea, as was indicated by the number of books that were sold, but it won't square with the God's Word.

From the beginning to the end of the Bible, God is described as both loving AND omnipotent. Moreover, he is a God who allows some very bad things to happen to some very good people—people like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Paul, not to mention His own Son. If we are to place our faith in the God of the Bible, we have to accept the fact that He is both loving and omnipotent.

And that brings us to the third response that one hears upon occasion, and that is something like, *"MY God wouldn't allow something like that to happen."* Well, about all that I can say to that opinion is that in the final analysis it really doesn't matter what YOUR God is like or, for that matter, what MY God is like—what matters is what God Himself—the God of the Bible—is like. He is the God we have to deal with—not a god we create to suit our own taste and whose actions make sense to us.

We have to face the fact that nothing happens apart from the knowledge and the will of God, as Jesus Himself testified when He said: *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are numbered."*

So let's cut to the chase: God loves us, but he allows bad things to happen to us. Sometimes He even *causes* bad things to happen to us. After all, the greatest catastrophe in the history of the world—the flood, which wiped out all of mankind except for eight people—was caused by God. The words of *Genesis* are absolutely clear: *"So the Lord said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth...for I am grieved that I have made them.' "* And the flood God sent made tsunamis and hurricanes and earthquakes look like child's play. The Bible is clear on this point in other places as well. In the *Book of Amos*, for example, we read: *"When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?"*

So there's no getting around the fact that our loving, merciful Father God not only allows, but sometimes *causes* great human suffering. If this is a stumbling block for you, you needn't feel alone. It has been a stumbling block for a lot of people throughout history. Why would a God who created us and who loves us allow us to suffer? It just doesn't make sense. Well, our problem begins in how we ask the question, *"Why would God allow that to happen?"*

I had a seminary professor who urged us to carefully examine our questions about God in order to discover what our real motives were in asking them. He used to say, *“There’s probably a sin somewhere in your question; examine yourself and you’ll find out what it is.”* As I tried doing this, I discovered that he was right. When a question occurred to me about God’s actions or motives and I examined it closely, it ended up having more to do with unbelief on my part than it did with an honest desire to know more about God.

To ask God why he does something that doesn’t make sense to us is to ask him to explain His actions in terms that we can understand. But stop and think for a moment: how would you go about explaining what you were doing to an ant? Do you think you could make a chipmunk understand why you were mowing the lawn? And what if the chipmunk grew disgusted with your inability to explain yourself in a way he could understand, and decided to punish you by refusing to believe in you or the lawnmower? *“There’s no man. There’s no lawnmower! I’ll do as I please!”*

This is laughable yet we insist that God explain Himself to us in a way that we can not only understand, but that we approve of. In effect, we set ourselves up as judges of God. The great English poet, John Milton, wrote his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, in order to *“justify the ways of God to man.”* With all due respect to Milton, it’s not God who needs to be justified in our eyes, but we who need to be justified in His.

And as far as understanding the purposes that lie behind His actions, we can’t, because, as he said through the prophet Isaiah, *“My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways; for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

In order for us to come to peace with this seeming paradox—the fact that God loves us yet allows horrible things to happen to us—we have to examine ourselves rather than God. And in order to do that, we need to go all the way back to the beginning, to the time when God created man and placed him in paradise as a steward over all He had made. He gave Adam and Eve paradise to live in and the opportunity to enjoy it all forever simply by refraining from acquiring the knowledge of evil.

But we all know what happened: Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation to “be like God and know what God knows,” so they decided to acquire the knowledge of evil. When they did this, they opened up a breach in creation through which sin came pouring into the world.

So by man’s choice sin now infects the world, bringing with it suffering and misery and disease and death, just as God told Adam it would. Sin is in the world because we and not God let it in and because we not only tolerate it but like it and actively pursue it. There’s not a person here today that doesn’t know and understand this. Yet we persist in blaming God for the consequences of sin—and the evil it brings with it.

When we ask, “How could a loving God permit bad things to happen,” what we really mean is, *“Why did God give us moral choice to begin with?”* Why did God give us the power to choose between good and evil?

To blame God for human suffering is to blame him for choices that we have made and continue to make every day of our lives.

You see, in our sin and sentimentality, we have replaced the God of the Bible with a god of our imagination: a kindly, grandfatherly god who is amused by the sinful antics of his mischievous grandchildren, rather than a Holy Father who is enraged by our sins. And kindly grandfathers NEVER get mad at their cute little grandchildren, do they? But if someone who had you completely in his power said to you: *“Do this and you will live; do that and you will die,”* and you “did that”—would you not expect to die? Well, Someone did.

God couldn't have made it plainer. He said to Adam, *“On the day you eat of it you will die.”* Through Moses, He said to the Israelites: *“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you...”* *But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.”* Yet we blame God for not honoring his own word.

The good news is that God's word doesn't end with Moses. If it did, we would all be headed for a kind of suffering that would make our present problems seem insignificant. God, our loving, merciful and omnipotent God, has looked down on us in pity and compassion, and has provided a way out, a way back to his mercy, his love, and his protection.

You see, God not only honors his word which He gave us through Moses, He also honors His incarnate Word to us in Jesus Christ, who came to draw all of God's wrath over sin down upon himself so that we might be spared. We can deal with God through Moses or we can deal with Him through Christ, and it's very, very important which way we choose.

Make no mistake: God's word through Moses is a scorched earth policy. If we step out from behind the cross of Jesus Christ, we will face God's thermonuclear wrath, and we will feel it forever. But if we “seek the Lord while he may yet be found and call upon Him while He is near” through Jesus Christ, we will walk through green pastures for all eternity.

We cannot understand God's ways; they are infinitely higher than our own. If we try to use our limited powers of understanding to comprehend his actions, we will end up drawing conclusions that dishonor God and subvert our faith. We will do no harm to Him, but we will do terrible damage to ourselves—and to others.

So when you hear the words, “Why would God...” forming in your mind, make sure that the words which follow them are “...love a poor, sinful, ignorant creature like me?” That is a question in which there is no sin.

Amen.