

"Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?" *By James E. Gibbons*



WE LIVE in a world that is very imperfect wherein a lot of bad things happen. Sometimes people become very disturbed and perplexed about this. Distraught, they ask, "Why do bad things happen? Why do bad things happen to good people?" And, more specifically, "Why do bad things happen even to Christians?" Is there any particular meaning or significance to all of this? How do we explain it?

In the light of the Scriptures, perhaps there are several different ways to look at this. There is a general way of looking at it. And, also, there is a more specific way. In this more specific way God and the devil are more personally and directly involved in what may be happening to us.

I. LOOKING AT IT IN A GENERAL AND A SPECIFIC WAY

A. In A General Way

Living in A World of Sin and Death

Bad things that happen in our lives may not mean anything at all beyond the fact that we are living in a world of sin and death. Adam and Eve sinned. Consequently, death came into the world with all of the hardships and bad experiences that lead up to and accompany it. We are fallen creatures and live in a world that is under the curse of sin (Genesis 2:17; 3:16-19). Universally, we read in Hebrews 9:27, that it is appointed unto men once to die. And the apostle Paul declared, "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain until now" (Romans 8:22). Being sinful, man was expelled from the Garden of Eden. It was not fitting that imperfect man should continue to live in a perfect environment. We believe that even our uneven weather patterns reflect this. A cursed world would remind man that he was imperfect and under the curse of sin (and that he needed a Savior).

(And the next verse that comes after Romans 8:22, reads, "And not only they [the world at large], but ourselves also [Christians], which have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit [know], the redemption of our body." Yes, after becoming a Christian, we are still living in a world of sin and death and are a part of this world that is still groaning and travailing in pain. But this only enhances and serves to intensify our hope as we look forward to our new eternal body and a "world" free from sin and death. Notice. Romans 8:24 further verifies what we are saying. The same imperfect world that accented our need of a Savior now enhances our anticipation of something better.)

"On the Just and on the Unjust"

Of significance to what we are writing about in this article is what Jesus said about the heavenly Father. Jesus said that "he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). Yes, the righteous and the unrighteous alike experience the blessings of the sunshine and the rain. The flipside of this line of thinking would take notice that the just and the unjust likewise

experience the consequences of living in a world that's cursed. We live in the same environment. And to extend this thought a little further, when being perplexed about why bad things happen to good people, we ask, "Why do good things happen to bad people?"

"Ye Shall All Likewise Perish"

Likewise notice Luke 13:1-5. "There were present at that season some that told him of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." These bad and catastrophic things that had happened were not to be looked upon as signifying anything special. The Jews seemed to look upon this as the hand of God bringing judgment upon sinners who were especially wicked. But the Lord brought them back to reality when he said, "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." (Yes, Paul said, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23). In addition to death because of Adam and Eve's sin, we have been under the sentence of death ever since we committed our first sin (Romans 5:12; 6:23). Instead of crying out, "Why me, Lord?!" many times it would be just as fitting to say, "Why not me, Lord?" It is just a matter of time and circumstance.

B. In A Specific Way

We read of various things taking place in Bible times. This may mean something and it may not as far as we personally are concerned. Obviously, during this time of progressive revelation and the unfolding of God's scheme of redemption to mankind, his dealings with man would be and were a little different than after this has been completed. And because God and the devil have been directly, personally and uniquely involved with a few selected people doesn't imply this happens to everyone in the same way. Nonetheless, it is profitable to study these cases and see if there is anything for us to learn that

would be applicable to our situation. And in doing this, Job and the apostle Paul come to the forefront as good illustrations. And there are others.

II. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE MAN JOB



God, Satan and Job

Read the first two chapters of the book of Job (and the last chapter). In an atmosphere of holy intrigue we are brought behind the visible scenes of that which will be taking place to get a glimpse of that which was going on. Interestingly, and perhaps to our surprise, we find God and Satan jointly involved in the things that happen to Job. Job is a God-fearing man who has been richly blessed by God. God points out “that there is none like him in [all] the earth, a perfect [blameless] and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth [turns away from] evil” (Job 1:8). “Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought [nothing]? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine

hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD" (1:9-12).

Bad Things Begin to Happen

In rapid succession, one after another, bad things begin to take place in Job's world (as it seems to be coming apart). Bad and violent things begin to happen, instigated by other human beings, which repeatedly result in the loss of life, loss of Job's property and his livestock. Natural calamities likewise take their toll as fire falls from heaven (evidently, lightning). And getting closer to Job all of the time, finally, "there came a great wind from the wilderness," destroying the house where his children were "eating and drinking." The house fell upon them, bringing death to all except one person who fled to tell about it. "Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly" (1:20-22).

"He Is in Thy Hand"

Sometime later God again points out Job's integrity and uprightness. In response, the devil lets it be known that he wants to take the harassment of Job a step farther. He wants to "get at" the very person of Job himself. Saying that "all that a man hath will he give for his life" (2:4-5), he thought he could bring Job to a breaking point. In subjecting him to what would personally be thrown at him, the devil believed he would curse God. "And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life. So went Satan forth from the presence of the LORD, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown" (2:6-7). We know the rest of the story as Job's wife wants him to curse God and die. "But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips" (2:9-10). He endured the grueling experience, along with the self-righteous lecturing of his "friends," to come out victorious and vindicated before God. He was tried and not found wanting.

Some Lessons Learned in Job

(1) Although “bad things” happening may be universal (and experienced by all of mankind at times), the reasons and the circumstances behind them are not necessarily the same as that of Job. Job was uniquely pointed out by God and picked out by Satan for what happened to him. As we noticed, the Lord said to Satan, “Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect [blameless] and an upright man, one that feareth God and escheweth evil?” (1:8; 2:3) Satan contends that the reason for Job being such a good person is because God has blessed him so much. Most people don’t have the status of Job, nor is the reason behind their suffering so specific. In the Bible account, of all the people on the earth the devil singles out Job to put to the test. And the Bible does not teach that every godly person is subjected to what Job went through.

(2) Clearly and simply, Job’s grueling experience and ordeal was a great trial of faith. He was put to the test, tried and not found wanting. He was proved to be genuine. He retained his faith and came out victorious. He was not serving God for selfish reasons, as the devil implied. He was serving God because God is God. Although our immediate circumstance may not be the same (our situation may be more general), all can look to Job as an example of perseverance and find a lesson in enduring trials. What a wonderful attitude he had! Here are some of his remarks spoken while experiencing trauma and stress. “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:20-22). “What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil [bad]?” (2:9-10). “Though he [the LORD] slay me, yet will I trust him...” (13:15). Let’s do more than evaluate Job’s example as a desirable theme for study, but emulate and imitate it in our lives!

(3) Then, if perchance our “behind-the-scene” situation is in a measure like Job’s (that the devil esteems us godly and that he wants to single us out personally to put us to the test, and God allows it), it really amounts to a back-handed compliment. Something “bad” is happening to us because we are a “good” person. Evidently God considers us a person who can hold up under adverse circumstances, and thereby by our example

bring glory to His Name. Thus, be of courage and good cheer. If that is the case, you have been chosen by God for a special mission. Try to be equal to the task.

James Brings Out Some More Lessons from Job

In James 5:11, Job is held up as an example of patience. This reads, "Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience [perseverance] of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord: that the Lord is very pitiful [compassionate], and of tender mercy." Looking at the context of this 5th chapter of James a little more closely, we find much of it has to do with the oppression of the poor by the rich (and especially the oppression of poor Christians). Not only are their salaries not paid, they suffer affliction even to the point of death from their rich oppressors. In such a harrowing circumstance they are admonished not to grumble and vent their frustration against one another. That is when they are told to look to Job (and the prophets) as an example (and examples). Then they are admonished, "Above all things" not to swear (James 5:12). How does that fit and tie into the con-text of Job? Remember, his wife wanted him to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Like Job, maintaining the same attitude (2:10), with patience we are to persevere in our troubles. James says to remember the outcome of the story of Job. God is merciful. The story has a good ending.

III. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE APOSTLE

Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

The apostle Paul is another excellent illustration of "bad" things happening to "good" people. We find his personal testimony in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. It reads, "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."

Strength through Weakness

As an apostle, with its unique mission, Paul had been given special and extraordinary revelations and insights. He had gone through the most amazing experiences. Being human, there was always the possibility that all of this might “go to his head.” This had happened to the Corinthians, even though they were on a more limited and inferior scale, as they became “puffed up,” thinking they had spiritual gifts that were superior to others. Paul was subjected to a most aggravating physical problem that he calls a “thorn in the flesh.” (And, interestingly, Paul thought of this lingering and piercing ailment as a “messenger of Satan,” buffeting him. We do not fully understand this statement, but we remember that Satan was likewise involved with what happened to Job.) “Bad things” happened to Paul, not because he was bad, but to keep him “good.” By his problem, evidently a health problem, he was continually made aware of his limitations as a human being and his need for complete reliance on the Lord. Consequently, this infirmity in the flesh became a great source of spiritual strength to him. And God’s strength was made perfect in weakness. Coming from this flawed human vessel, the display of God’s message and power was the more auspicious.

Applicable to All of Us

We are not apostles today. We have not seen the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:1). Supernatural powers have not been channeled through us in miracles (2 Corinthians 12:12). Nor have we received revelations from the Lord (Ephesians 3:5). Yet from the general way of looking at it, not even taking the specific into consideration as a factor, we can gain the same results from our “thorn in the flesh” experience as the apostle Paul. We learn to live with our health problems. We learn to look to the Lord and trust him as never before. God has taken that which seems bad and made something good out of it. In being weak we have become spiritually strong. God’s strength is made perfect in weakness. It can accomplish that if we let it. The worst thing that ever happened to us could be the best thing that ever happened to us if we don’t let it get the best of us.

“All Things Are Yours”

In view of his continuing experience, Paul said, “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of

Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:9b). Then he goes beyond his immediate “thorn in the flesh” experience to include all negative experiences to make something positive out of them. “Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10). And in 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 he takes this application a step further, applying it to everything and to every Christian, “Therefore let no man glory in men [as the Corinthians were doing, and not in the Lord]. For all things are yours; Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; And ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.” They were inappropriately elevating men (Paul, Apollos and Cephas) who were simply servants and mutually belonged to all of them; these men had introduced them to Christianity (1 Corinthians 3:5-6). Paul goes beyond them to say that “all things are yours,” to serve Christians in God’s scheme of things. “All things” literally (even good and bad) were theirs in living the Christian life and accomplishing the glory of God. “All things” were to be accepted as challenges within the context of the purpose and will of God. Christianity is to be experienced in the arena of life as it is (and even death itself is a servant to Christians).

“All Things Work Together for Good”

No doubt, Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” experience, along with everything else, led him to assuredly say, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). He approached everything from the viewpoint of the will of God being done (Acts 18:21; 21:14; 1 Corinthians 4:19). He even looked upon “bad” things, whether in the general or specific category, as having the potential for good. They could and would be used for good, if we would but let them. He said, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:17). When in his first Roman imprisonment, and facing an uncertain future, he said, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). In his second Roman imprisonment, facing certain death, he said, “For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good

fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8). Now he could claim death as his servant (1 Corinthians 3:21-22), ushering him into the very presence of God and all the wonderful things that God has in store.

IV. OTHER SCRIPTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Those "Oppressed by the Devil"

The apostle Peter, when he visited the household of Cornelius, told these Gentiles that Jesus "went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil" (Acts 10:38). These words, "oppressed of the devil," could have been spoken in a general way (as all of humanity are subject to the curse), and some sins have their harmful consequences "built" into them. And, no doubt, some of those the Lord healed were directly "oppressed of the devil," although we may not know the "particulars." Evidently, there was a relationship between the paralytic man's paralysis and his sins (the man who was let down through the roof and healed by Jesus). When the critics pondered that Jesus had forgiven this man's sins, he replied, "For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?" (Matthew 9:5). To the man he healed who couldn't walk down to the pool, Jesus said, "Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more lest a worse thing come unto thee" (John 5:14). Jesus healed a woman that was "bowed together," "whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years" (Luke 13:11-16). So, Satan was involved in the bad things that happened, whether directly or indirectly. The devil is out to work as much havoc as he can get by with.

The Phenomenon of Demon Possession

We know little about the phenomenon of demon possession, but this seems to have been widespread when Christ was here. Evidently the devil wanted to defiantly "kick up his heels" in the face of God. We do know it brought torture and misery to people's lives. It even happened to good people. Demon possession didn't necessarily mean that the person was wicked who experienced it. The Syrophenician woman's "young daughter had an unclean spirit" and she besought the Lord to cast it out

(Mark 7:24-30). When Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, a man approached him about his son who was demon possessed. "And they brought him unto him: and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming. And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child" (Mark 9:14-21). Because Mary Magdalene had seven demons cast out of her (Luke 8:2) does not mean she had been a bad woman. But this was one way that the devil was making bad things happen to people.

Chastised of the Lord

Another thing to be considered is the chastening of the Lord. This is taught in the Scriptures. Read Hebrews 12:4-13. Here the writer states, "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?" Chastisement may be looked upon as specific and direct involvement of God in our lives, and it also can be considered in a general sense. With Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, it took the form of direct and immediate punishment that was irrevocable and final. Likewise, the Corinthians were eating and drinking damnation to their souls by desecrating the Lord's Supper. Paul wrote, "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world" (1 Corinthians 11:27-32). Obviously, what happened to Ananias and Sapphira (and the Corinthians) does not take place every time these sins are committed again. Perhaps this happened so that for time and eternity we would know what God thinks about such flagrant wrongs.

Chastisement Generically

But, getting back to the Scripture in Hebrews 12, it may be that this chastisement was more in the general category. The writer seems to be even talking about persecution. According to verse 4, they had "not yet resisted unto blood." But they had endured "afflictions," along with their property being confiscated (Hebrews 10:32-34). Paul tells us that "all that will live

godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12). And Hebrews 12:7, talking about the same thing from another angle, reads, "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?" To our amazement, God was using what was adversely happening to them, coming from hostile non-Christians, as chastisement for their spiritual well-being. This is not altogether unusual for God used heathen nations, like Assyria and Babylon, to bring judgment and chastisement upon Israel in Old Testament times. All things are at God's disposal to be used for our good (and "all things" are ours). Therefore, when "bad" things happen, we should make an effort to look at them in a positive way.

An Amazing Injunction

That brings us to a most amazing injunction, fittingly, with which to cap off our thoughts in this article. We are talking about James 1:2-5. Admittedly, what James commands here is hard to obey, but he gives us helpful instructions in implementing our obedience. "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations [all kinds of trials]; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." What is he saying here? "Count it all joy when you fall into" various trials! This word "fall" in the language of the New Testament means to fall into something that is all around you. You are engulfed in trials. Incredible! And to think of this in terms of joy?! But he envisions spiritual good coming from our experience. And if we are having problems seeing the spiritual outcome, we are instructed to pray for wisdom. God will help us through our trials. "Bad things" do happen to "good people," but God can make a most meaningful experience out of it. That is the kind of God that we serve. Trust Him. □



E-Mail:

theswordandstaff@embarqmail.com

The SWORD and STAFF

Post Office Box 147

Mt. Airy, NC 27030 USA