

Why Do Bad Things Happen to God's People?

By Rev. Susan Gritman

My struggle with the “Why?!” question began after the loss of my first baby. This happened at a time when I felt God had blessed me with a miracle pregnancy because we had asked God to help me get pregnant. I believed in God, but I did not have a personal relationship with God at that point in my life. So, instead of turning to God for comfort and strength, I turned away from God. I felt abandoned by God. Then I was angry, wondering why God didn't prevent this pain and loss. I believed God existed, but I didn't understand Him and I sure didn't like Him. If He is God, wouldn't He have both the power and concern to do something to eliminate pain from those who believe in Him?

Three years later, God drew me back to Him and I found a personal relationship with Jesus that transformed my pain into joy. Even though I did not understand God's ways, I discovered God's love and decided to try to trust Him again. Faith seeks understanding, and I continued to wrestle with questions for years. If it was possible, I wanted to understand God's nature and ways. I am grateful to God for revealing to me over time some perspective through experience, Scripture, reason, and the wisdom of other prayerful and thoughtful Christians and scholars. God has allowed me to share this revelation with many people whose doubt that there is a good God has been a stumbling block to trusting in God's Love. In case you are in that place where you are asking the Why questions, I share briefly the understanding that God has revealed to me.

Bad things happen for *various* reasons in our world. There is evil working in our world, and Satan, not God, is the author of evil. The spirit of evil and the spirit of God are both at work, and God has given us free will to choose. “Could God stop all the pain and suffering in our world? Yes! He could because He is God. And yet He could not because He is God. We have a free will that was given to us by Him.” (J. Sadraque Cius, *Haiti: Beyond the Rubble*. P. O. Ministries, Inc., 2014, p. 89) He gives us free will to choose so that our love for Him – the relationship He so desires and that we so need – will be real and not manipulated.

We all have made choices against God, and this sin has grave *natural* consequences, which God *allows* for our own education. God, our coach and cheerleader, guides us with His very presence so that it is possible to make godly choices, and He celebrates when we do make godly choices. Unfortunately, we often ignore God and make many very bad choices. Sometimes we experience trouble and heartbreak due to our *own* choices and their natural consequences. Sometimes the pain and struggles are due to the bad choices of *others*, and God who gives free will does not withhold free will from a sinner, even to protect those who love Him. He does not take back his gifts.

An example would be the death of someone killed in an accident caused by a drunk driver. God will try to influence that drunk driver not to drive, but God does not take the gift of free will away from that drunk driver. The Holy Spirit may speak into the mind of a friend of that drunk and say, “Offer to drive him/her home. Insist on it.” But what if that friend does not want to offend or put themselves out, and consequently ignores God’s voice? And even if that friend insists on driving, the one under the influence of alcohol has the free will to resist. God does not force His children to obey Him because He will not take away the gift of free will.

I know that the loss of our baby had nothing to do with anyone’s bad choices. I might have liked to know there was someone I could blame since there is a strange comfort in answers, but in this case it was no one’s fault. Sometimes bad things just happen due to the natural laws at work in our created world. Our bodies are vulnerable to sickness even though they have been created with amazing defenses and healing capacity. God as Creator put natural laws into place and usually allows those natural forces to operate in the world without His intervention. As an example, gravity is a natural law of God’s created order. It serves a good purpose. However, there are situations where the law of gravity causes pain, such as when we fall down. Could God prevent us from falling down or prevent the pain from a fall? God could but God does not always intervene. God is at work, though, helping us learn from that fall. We learn to live within the laws operative in the world. I know God sometimes chooses to intervene and circumvent the natural laws for His purposes. When God intervenes to prevent a fall for reasons of His own we might recognize it and call it a miracle or a “God-thing.”

Of course, I thought God should have intervened in my case. People would tell me that if the baby had been born, it might have had birth defects. Why didn’t God intervene and fix the baby so it could be a normal, healthy baby? And even if God had not intervened to fix the baby, couldn’t God have at least intervened to fix me or the baby so it could *live*? I am sure God’s grace would have brought many blessings through life with a child with abnormalities. I would have embraced the life of my child with abnormalities – that’s what mothers do – they love unconditionally.

Why did God not intervene? I don’t know. I’ll have to ask God when I get to heaven. In this case God *allowed* death as a *natural consequence* of a pregnancy that was not healthy. I am certain that God did not decide to “take the baby” as some people suggested. Our God of love is there at times of death to *receive* his children into Love and eternal life, but that is a very different thing than making a decision to take a baby away from its mother. Neither did God “need the baby more than we did” as others suggested. That is not in the Bible! And those comments were not comforting or helpful! These suggestions were offered to me by well-meaning people who needed answers so badly that they made them up! The not-knowing is unsettling to live with.

What is true and in the Bible is that God promises to work for good in the midst of all things. I add my own testimony to that of Scripture. I know that in all things God works together for my good because I love Him and am called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28) In the case of the baby that was lost to me, God was doing more than looking down from heaven shaking His head and thinking how sad the whole situation was. He determined not to leave me suffering and confused but to bring healing and use my experience to bring me closer to Him. And over and over God has used my experience of the loss of my child to enable me to minister with great compassion and understanding to others going through the same loss. Thanks be to God.

Some relevant Scriptures:

The question of why bad things happen is as old as the beginning of Scripture. The book of Genesis describes the first acts of disobedience and its consequences. It was a common belief in Jesus' day that sin was the root of suffering. The book of **Job** is a good example. Job's friends kept insisting Job's suffering must have come from some unidentified sin. Here are examples of Jesus' answers when asked the "Why?" question.

John 9:1-3

1 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. **2** "Rabbi," his disciples asked him, "why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents' sins?" **3** "It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus answered. "This happened so the power of God could be seen in him.

Commentary: Jesus affirms that not all suffering is brought on because of sin. Jesus' answer reinforces the belief that God works for good in all things to transform suffering and to heal. Jesus healed this man born blind, and in so doing possibly brought emotional healing to his parents who might have been thinking that their sin was the root of their son's blindness. Both God's compassion and power were displayed in this healing.

Luke 13:1-5

1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. **2** Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? **3** I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. **4** Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? **5** I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Commentary: When informed about the horror of the death of the Galileans, Jesus uses the opportunity to do two things. First he exposes the fallacy of the thinking that every suffering is due to sin and that everything that happens on this earth is fair. Secondly, he uses the opportunity to warn about the coming judgment. A major theme of Jesus' teaching is to be ready because we do not know the day or hour of Christ's return or the end of our lives.

The common thinking was that “if God is responsible for everything that happens, and God is a just God, then calamities must be the result of human sinfulness. The fallacy in such logic is the notion that God is the immediate cause of all events, which leaves no room for human freedom or freedom in the created order, and therefore for events that God does not control... Jesus drives home the point that life is uncertain, death is capricious, and judgment is inevitable... (*The New Interpreters Bible*, Volume IX. Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1995. p. 270-271).”

While Jesus did not address why the tower of Siloam fell, he ruled out the cause being that the eighteen who were killed were more sinful than all the others in Jerusalem. The reason the tower fell may be that there was structural instability due to deterioration or the way it was engineered. Gravity was certainly at work and God did not intervene to prevent its fall. But we also have no evidence that God planned the fall of that tower at just moment when those particular eighteen people would be in its path. Without further evidence, it would be reasonable to assume the tower’s fall and those who were killed was an act of nature – not an act of God’s punishment or display of power.

I do not believe God controls everything, i.e. the direct cause of all events, but that does not mean that God is not sovereign. I’ll address that more fully in another article.

A Helpful Resource:

The Will of God by Leslie Weatherhead