

# Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

What do we do when we are notified at work that a loved one has met with a fatal accident, or that our house is on fire or our child has been abducted . . . or arrested? What do we do when our spouse confesses to us a recent or past infidelity, or even a fantasized infidelity, and our whole marriage seems to crumble?

What do we do when the doctor tells us that our child will never live a "normal" life, that our precious son or daughter will need our care—or someone's care—their entire lives? What do we do when the job we've worked at for however long hands us a pink slip at the end of the day or week and we know that jobs are scarce and unemployment less than sufficient for our bills?

“Why do bad things happen to good people?” is a question that all people ask at one time or another in one form or another. Sometimes it’s a more specific question, such as, “Why does bad stuff always happen to me?” or “Why did God allow this?” Some people even express their frustration and ask, “If God is so good, why would he allow this to happen to good people?”

## The Question

The question itself implies a moral universe, the existence of *good* and *bad*, and a difference between the two. It assumes that events and people can be either *good* or *bad*. It further suggests

- (1) that only good things should happen to good people;
- (2) that bad things should happen only to bad people; and
- (3) that a good God would make sure that only good things happen to good people and that bad things happen only to bad people.

But does that match reality? How do we define what is good, what is bad, who is good, and who is bad? What are bad things? And what do we mean by good people? Are we thinking of the same characteristics and quality of *goodness* when we apply that description to God?

Whew! Okay, let’s take one question at a time.

## A “Good” God

First, what do we mean by a good God? Many people who ask the question about bad things happening use the term *good God* in a way that signals their disbelief in Him. They are really

suggesting that either, since bad things happen, there is no good God, or that if there is a God, he isn't really good.

But there is a good God, as many of us know. However, do we really understand that God alone is good in the sense of having an intrinsic nature which is only and totally good, with no spot of bad (or sin), and that his goodness is beneficial to us? Are we sure that his intent is to bless, not to harm? Do we believe what is written about him, that "God is love" (1 John 4:8)? Do we understand that this God who is love is the triune Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures?

If we do, we will know that this God, the Father, who is love, loved all of us collectively and each of us individually, so much that he sent His Son, Jesus (who is also love), to die the most horrible death imaginable in our place so that we could be free of what is bad in us and spend eternity with Him, where nothing bad can hurt us again. And, believing this, if we grow in knowledge about this loving God, we will learn that the Holy Spirit, who also is love, was sent to teach us the truth of all things which God has accomplished for us and wants us to enjoy. That same Holy Spirit will help us live lives that are good, as we yield to God, who is good.

So that's what we mean by a good God. (Read John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 21; and Titus 2:11–14.)

## “Good” People

Who do we mean by the term, “good people”? When a rich man approached Jesus and addressed him as “Good Master,” Jesus replied to him, “Why do you call me good? There is none good but God.” (Matthew 19:17 and Mark 10:18).

Here was Jesus, the Son of God in a human body, stating that no one but God is good. Since he is God, that would include him. But he recognized that the man who was questioning him didn't really believe that, but was merely addressing him as he would address any other scholar or teacher. So, Jesus makes the point that no person can be called good, in comparison to God, who alone is intrinsically good (sinless, moral, holy, righteous, and perfect).

Of course, we all like to think of ourselves as basically good. We like to think that people we know are basically good. And by *good* we mean that we generally abide by the laws of the land (except, possibly, the speed limits), that we try to help others and don't willfully harm others. This is at best a goodness defined as being something or acting in some way that is

beneficial to society. But it falls short of the goodness of God, as to His essential nature. After all, some societies consider it *good* to blow oneself up and to, thereby, murder innocent children, women, and men at the same time.

Most of us would agree, though, that such behavior is not *good* in any sense of the word. We would argue that *good* should benefit others, not harm them.

However, when we look at human actions in general, we have to conclude that, compared to God, we have no essential nature of *goodness*. Even though humans can act in ways that are beneficial to others or are socially acceptable, some people are also likely to harm others either directly or as a consequence of other actions.

We can't measure up to God's standard. Why? Because all people are born with a tendency to do wrong (sin), as part of our human nature. This is often referred to as *original sin*, which means that it originates in the human heart and is part of what makes us human.

In high school, I starred in our junior class play, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. It always troubled me to proclaim her line that said, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are basically good at heart." It bothered me because I had learned about original sin. It bothered me because I knew the Jewish (Old Testament) scripture that says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9, KJV).

In a dialogue hosted by Biola University and accessed online, Dennis Prager, a well-known Jewish scholar and political commentator, said, "The most foolish and dangerous belief a person can have is that people are basically good." His statement is supported by Scripture from both the Old and New Testaments. (Read Jeremiah 17:9; Psalm 14:1–3; and Romans 3:10–23.)

Look around at the crime rate in our country and at the horrific things that happen here and abroad, such as the genocide occurring throughout the world. We have to conclude that humanity is not *good* and is not getting better, but is, in fact, getting worse. The "heart" of the collective human race and of individuals in particular is indeed "deceitful" and "desperately wicked."

The only way we can become good is to be born-again in Christ. With his spirit dwelling in us, we stand in his goodness. Second Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (MEV).

Moreover, if we accept the new life which comes by faith in Jesus Christ and acknowledge that we need the Spirit of God to enable us to be a good person, even though we still are prone to

do wrong things upon occasion, we will be able to live a life that is *good* (a life of kindness, justice, and righteousness, which things are important to society).

Some people may appear good—moral, just, and kind—apart from Christ, but theirs is an outer goodness based on doing the right thing, not an intrinsic goodness based on having a right spirit within them.

That's why we cannot define "good" in a subjective way apart from biblical truth. If we do, we find that what we call *bad* is called *good* by someone else, and things the Bible calls sin—or bad—they call *good*. Thus, defining good in a subjective way leads to confusion and chaos.

However, I think we can all agree about the things which happen that are "bad." And, since bad things happen to both good and bad people, let's simplify the question to this: "Why do bad things happen?"

## Bad Things

Okay, so we've realized that bad things do happen to people. And I think that we can all agree that if there was one single answer as to why bad things happen to people, that one single answer would be so simplistic we'd have to reject it in search of something more relevant to the situation that we are, at the moment, thinking of as a "bad thing." I mean, the answer can't possibly be the same for everything, can it?

I like to think about the standard answer a parent gives to a child who whines, "Why do I have to put up my toys," (or whatever the instruction has been): "Because I said so." While that answer does establish the order of authority in the home (a good thing for us to teach and to remember in our families and in our relationship with our good God), it does little to address the child's specific complaint at the time.

"Because I said so," or "Because stuff just happens" is not sufficient answer for the situations we likely would question:

1. Violent crimes against individuals;
2. Consequences of poor choices;
3. Religious persecution;
4. Natural disasters; and
5. Afflictions in body.

## Bad Thing #1: Violent Crimes against Individuals

I just listed five categories above. Though I'm tempted to deal with the first category last, I'm going to go ahead and address it first. In this category, I include rape, abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, mental, and psychological), assault, discrimination, being bullied, and any other crime against an individual.

Recent statistics show that in this nation, one out of every four women will be battered or sexually abused at some time in her life. In foreign countries, women are treated even worse: some are forced into sex slavery; millions suffer mutilation and so-called "female circumcision" (the old term for what is now known as female genital mutilation); many are raped as part of an ethnic genocide; and yet others face so-called "honor killings." Why does a good God allow this? Or, even if you reject God, why do these bad things happen?

The key to understanding this is to realize that God has given each of us a free will—the capacity and permission to select our own behavior and beliefs. Even the unbeliever recognizes that humans have free will. Having a free will is an essential part of human nature.

And God will not interfere with the free-will choices that people make, even those choices which harm other people. He is not pleased with such choices; such choices are abhorrent and evil to him; they are sins which Christ bore upon the cross. But for those who reject Christ, their behavior, being their own choice, will be allowed by God, even to their own destruction if they do not repent. God does not make robots of people—believers or unbelievers.

So then, the *bad things* that happen to people—with respect to personal injury and abuse, violation and degradation, trauma and victimization—those *bad things* are not God's doing, but instead are the doing of people who insist on their own way. We cannot blame God for the deeds and behavior of those people. To do so is as unfair as the abuser saying to the battered woman, "You made me hit you," or the rapist saying, "You wanted me to rape you," or the bully saying to the smaller child, "You asked me to bully you."

So, obviously, if these personal attacks are not God's fault and not the fault of the person who is attacked, whose fault are they? Well, the attackers' of course. The ones who batter, rape, bully, devalue, denigrate, and otherwise victimize the innocent and, often, weaker person.

Though not forbidding these bad things to be done by people who have free will, God does stand ready and able to comfort and heal the victim, to soothe away the violation and heal the body and soul, and to, within the working of the legal system, bring about justice—punishment

of the criminal and restitution to the victims, where applicable. And to the perpetrator who does not repent, an eternal judgment and justice will come.

We might ask why God doesn't intervene in behalf of one who believes in him. Why doesn't he supernaturally stop the perpetrator from committing that personal crime to and injury of that person who believes in him? Sometimes he has. And sometimes he does. But God, in his infinite wisdom and knowledge, knows when such intervention is essential from an eternal perspective.

I think of the student at Columbine, Cassie Bernall, who was asked by one of the shooters, "Do you believe in God?" Her reply was, "Yes. Jesus Christ is my personal Lord and Savior." We might think that such bold confession of faith should have earned divine protection for her. Her life should have been spared—right? And what of the life of the other Christian girl, Rachael Scott, who was also killed?

Their lives were spared, when we look from the grander, eternal perspective. Though the shooter shot them and took their temporal lives, they stepped into eternity with a martyr's crown, as surely as the first century Christians who, at Nero's hand, faced lions, were burned as human torches, or were beheaded as was the apostle Paul.

As for the martyrs at Columbine, we may never know, this side of heaven, how much their testimonies accomplished in this life in causing their peers and others to seek God. What an accomplishment in a life, for these high school students to stand as a testimony to the reality of God, who welcomed them home in that instant.

There are other times when God may intervene. I've heard stories of missionaries who were divinely and miraculously shielded from ungodly attackers and, thereby, preserved to continue their ministries.

But even when one is not rescued from the assault, whatever kind it is, God is always there to heal the wounds and bring the wounded one through to live a full, productive, and blessed life. God can transform every victim into a victor.

## Bad Thing #2: Consequences of Poor Choices

The second type of bad thing to consider is that which comes as natural consequences to our own bad choices or wrong behavior. The world would say that "we get what we deserve," "we get what's coming to us," or "what goes around comes around." I'm sure you've heard these expressions. The Bible says that we will reap what we sow. Anyone who has ever planted a

garden, flowers, or a field knows the truth of that statement. I've never planted tomatoes and harvested cucumbers from them. (I may plant tomatoes and end up with weeds along side them, however; but that's a different topic . . . .)

Why should we expect it to be any different when it comes to our choices of behavior? If I rob a bank, I should expect to get caught and to be thrown into prison. If I cheat on a test in school, I should expect to fail the test or worse—get kicked out of class or out of school. And even when it comes to things not necessarily against the law or against the rules of a group, if I gossip about my friends, I should expect them to gossip about me in return. That's just the way it is.

Lamentations 3:39 (written by the prophet Jeremiah) asks, “Then why should we, mere humans, complain when we are punished for our sins?” (NLT). That is a good question, indeed. Why should we complain about the bad things that happen to us when those bad things are simply the result or consequences of our bad choices? Jeremiah's solution is simple: “Instead, let us test and examine our ways. Let us turn back to the LORD” (v. 40 NLT).

After we consider our choices and behavior, we should realize what we did wrong and repent for that. We should ask God to forgive us, and then we should re-commit our lives and our choices to him, in worship and surrender to his will and to his ways.

Of course, that doesn't always remove the consequences. If I've robbed a bank, been imprisoned, then repented, I still will have to serve my time. But there is hope for a better life afterwards. Micah 7:9 describes the heart condition of one who is suffering the consequences of their wrong behavior, but, having repented, is waiting upon the Lord to resolve the matter. Sometimes God does reverse the consequences; sometimes he just gets us through them so we can move on.

The important thing to remember is that we do have a personal responsibility to ourselves, to society, and to God, to make right choices: choices that are not harmful to us or to others, choices that benefit society, and choices that do not violate the holiness of God. If we fail to make those right choices, we can expect bad things to happen as consequences.

The apostle Peter makes a very good statement for us: “Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or an evildoer, or even as a busybody” (1 Peter 4:15 MEV). If we are just getting what we deserve for our own actions, then we have no right to complain about the bad things which are happening. And we definitely have no business blaming God for such natural consequences.

I saw this statement posted in a high school classroom in which I was substitute teaching:

Watch your thoughts, for they become your words.  
Watch your words, for they become your actions.  
Watch your actions, for they become your habits.  
Watch your habits, for they become your character.  
Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.

If we had to compress that into one step, we could say it like this: “Watch your behavior, for it becomes your future.”

Let’s not end up suffering bad things as a result of our own bad choices. When that’s the case, we have no excuse.

### Bad Thing #3: Religious Persecution

In 1 Peter 4:14, the apostle Peter talks about this third kind of bad thing—persecution: the abduction, imprisonment, and killing of people for their Christian faith. We don't see a lot of physical persecution in this country (yet), but it prevails in many other countries. In the Islamic Mideast and in many African countries, such as Nigeria, the persecution of Christians is routine. Many are tortured, raped, murdered, locked in churches and burned, shot, or hacked with machetes.

One doesn't have to be a history expert to know that the first century Christians were persecuted to death. They were cast into the arena and devoured by lions as a public spectacle; they were tied to stakes and burned as torches in Nero's garden; they were crucified; they were beheaded. One can read *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and see how extensive has been martyrdom for Christ.

Why would a good God allow his people to suffer this way? Is there something to be gained in that kind of suffering? Yes, there is. After all, Jesus did no wrong, and he suffered and died for us, leaving us that example (1 Peter 2:21–22). Jesus pronounced blessing upon those who were persecuted for his sake (Matthew 5:10–12). He warned the disciples often that they would be persecuted (Luke 21:12; John 15:20; and other places). And the apostle Paul instructs us to “Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not” (Romans 12:14 KJV).

I know this is possible, because I've seen videos of persecuted Christians in Nigeria who, even after having lost family members, still praise God and pray for the murderers who are bent on destroying them. I know it is possible because those martyred in that first century (and centuries

following) left behind a testimony like that of Stephen, who, as he was being stoned, "knelt down and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'" (Acts 7:60 MEV).

Would that be easy? Not for our natural self. Only our new nature, "Christ in [us], the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27 KJV), could pray for and bless a persecutor. We could do it in the Spirit's power, with our mind set on what is beyond this life. We can depend upon God's promise: "If we suffer, we shall also reign with him" (2 Timothy 2:12 KJV); we are set to become "joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him" (Romans 8:17 KJV).

We need to see beyond the persecution, beyond the *bad thing* that is happening at the moment. We need to realize that there is far more to life than our brief time on earth. When we see the bigger picture, we can see more clearly. A good example is how we can see a rainbow as a full circle from the sky (heaven), instead of a mere arc as seen from earth.

But why should we have to suffer? Why would God allow others to persecute his people?

Don't gold and silver have to be heated to a liquid state in order to separate out the impurities? Doesn't a loaf of bread have to be baked in an oven (or bread machine) in order to be tasty? Heat must be applied. Peter speaks much of this in his first letter, especially in 1 Peter 1:6–7. And in 1 Peter 5:10, he says that the "God of all grace, who has called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus," is using the suffering to make us complete, to establish and strengthen us, and to settle us in our faith (KJV).

In our nation now, the persecution is less obvious but still present. We may be sued, accused of not being politically correct, or blacklisted because of some false claim against us or because we stand for the truth and righteousness of God. We might be criticized, censored, or cancelled. But the same Word of God that encourages those under physical persecution can and should encourage us. And at our nation's current rate of decline, we might soon face physical persecution.

## Bad Thing #4: Natural Disasters

The fourth kind of bad thing that I want to consider here is something that is common to our human experience: natural disasters or chance occurrences. In Ecclesiastes 9:11 we read that, "time and chance" happen to all people. The Hebrew word for "time" used in this verse hints at eternity, because it refers to time *that continues* as well as time *that is now*. The word for "chance" literally means "occurrence of God." Thus, the "occurrences of God" happen to everyone—even nonbelievers—in the present, in the future, and in eternity.

Jesus said that God gives the sun and the rain to both the good and the bad (Matthew 5:45). So, good things and bad things occur to everyone. That's just the way it is.

Solomon also wrote that one event happens to all (Ecclesiastes 2:14). I used to think that the *event* referred to *death*; however, the Hebrew word used doesn't mean "a final event," but rather "something met with; an accident or misfortune; an occurrence." Thus, when there is an event, like a natural disaster, it happens to everyone in the area, regardless of whether they are good or bad people, saved or unsaved, Christian or non-Christian.

In many cases, the Lord will protect or deliver his people. (I've heard of miraculous deliverances and rescues of Christians, and sometimes non-Christians, in various disasters.) But, generally speaking, the event happens to all. However, why does God allow hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, floods, earthquakes, and forest fires to happen?

Many forest fires are started by careless individuals or by arsonists. God could intervene, but he refuses to rob us of our free-will. He could robotically control those individuals, but he will not violate their free will. Other fires are started by lightning, a natural result of a storm. Why are there storms? Storms occur when contrasting weather fronts collide or from other types of natural phenomena. I remember when "cloud seeding" first was experimented with. That was an interference by man on the natural world. (And we could blame "global warming," pretending that humans have the power to control the elements of nature on a long-term basis, other than temporarily seeding a cloud.) Poor conservation practices in forests also enable fires to quickly spread out of control.

Also, the natural geo-physical makeup of the planet allows for (or causes) earthquakes to happen and volcanoes to erupt. These happen more frequently and more intensely as time goes by, because the earth itself is groaning and crying out against the sin which has engulfed the world. Yes, that may sound strange to some readers, but Romans 8:19–23 discusses this phenomenon and likens that groaning to labor pains. The earth itself wants to be delivered from the presence of sin, which will involve the end of this present church age and the beginning of a glorious thousand-year reign of Jesus the Messiah and his people Israel. (But that's a much larger topic than I want to go into here.)

At any rate, events like this occur. We shouldn't take it personally unless we were the one starting the forest fire or seeding the clouds. The Christian will take it from God's hand and rely

upon the Lord to help him rebuild his life and property, knowing that God does restore, as he did to Job (Job 42:12), making the disaster work for good.

And, quite often, those who do not know God will come to know him, as Christian relief groups, such as Samaritan's Purse, go into the devastated area to help.

Thus, God allows the disasters because he is working a greater and an eternal purpose in the lives of people. We need to rest in him, knowing that he does work all things together for good (Romans 8:28).

## Bad Thing #5: Afflictions in Body

We ended the previous post with the thought that God causes things to serve a greater and an eternal purpose. And that leads to the fifth type of bad thing—afflictions in body. These include terminal disease, life-changing injuries, disabilities or special needs, and illnesses and conditions from which people generally recover. God allows these things to bring a person to faith in the Lord or to increase a person's faith in him. Sometimes they happen as a consequence to faulty behavior (like driving drunk and crashing a car or swapping needles and getting AIDS). In some cases, an individual is born with a limitation. Other times, warfare results in permanent injury. And aging—the deterioration of the body—is a natural part of the human condition.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures . . . but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." In other words, in our pain, we can hear God calling us to himself—for salvation, restoration, and healing. In our pain, we are moved to care for others in their pain because we can identify with them.

The Samaritan's Purse ministry reports the story of a man who had been bedbound by depression. He came out of it when a tornado hit his home town and he volunteered to help his neighbors clean up and rebuild. Losing one's home to a tornado is definitely a bad thing, but God used it for good in that man's life; and the man acknowledged such and was thankful. His affliction was cured when he helped a neighbor who suffered a loss from a natural disaster.

Sometimes, the only way our stubborn minds will open up to the wooing of the Lord is for us to suffer a loss so great that we come to the end of ourselves. Vickie Baker, A dear friend of mine, now living in heaven, was such a one. She had what she thought was an ideal life, having run away to join the circus and becoming one of the first to perform a two-and-a-half on the trapeze.

But while practicing that two-and-a-half, she missed the catch and plummeted to the net; she knew how to land, but, for some reason, didn't tuck her neck that time. She landed on her head, sustained irreparable spinal cord damage, and became quadriplegic. She went through a tough recovery and spent the next three years adjusting to her disability and attempting suicide.

After her last suicide attempt was thwarted, she finally called out for help—from God. He gave her a sign—she suddenly could perform a hand movement she had not been able to do previously. Although she remained quadriplegic, she accepted Jesus Christ as her Savior. She rejoiced that she had gained a "new ringmaster" to direct her. She used to quip that she had been "sentenced to the electric chair for life"; but she truly believed that salvation and her relationship with the Lord was worth giving up the fame and fun of circus life. God used the bad thing for good.

See her books, *Surprised by Hope: From Circus Girl to Quadriplegic—A Journey through Tragedy to a Promise for Tomorrow*, © 2000 by Horizon Books, and *On Wings of Joy: Reflections of a Quadriplegic Trapeze Artist*, © 1999, Ampelos Press. (These are available at [https://www.amazon.com/Surprised-Hope-Quadriplegic-Journey-Tomorrow/dp/0889651612/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?dchild=1&keywords=Surprised+by+hope%3A+From+Circus+Girl+to+Quadriplegic&qid=1619908915&s=books&sr=1-2](https://www.amazon.com/Surprised-Hope-Quadriplegic-Journey-Tomorrow/dp/0889651612/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=Surprised+by+hope%3A+From+Circus+Girl+to+Quadriplegic&qid=1619908915&s=books&sr=1-2) or <https://writehisanswer.com/viewproduct/78>; and at <https://writehisanswer.com/viewproduct/34>.)

For Vickie, as for any of us, whatever we must face in order to "get right with God" is worth it. He enriches our lives now and guarantees our eternal life with him after death. He is always working to save and to bless whosoever will believe in him. And sometimes, he heals our physical afflictions. Sometimes he allows either modern or holistic medicine to intercede and restore our health. And sometimes, he uses the affliction as our passage home to heaven. We need to acknowledge him in all things as our sovereign Lord who loves us.

## But *Why*?

Sometimes a believer will start to go the wrong way, forgetting God and his word, and will walk in either willful rebellion or unintentional disobedience. In my late teens, I was such a person. In cases like this, the Lord will use trials and bad things to get our attention and cause us to return to fellowship with him. "Before I was afflicted, I went astray," says Psalm 119:67. These bad things are the discipline of God to bring us back to him, just like good parents will discipline their children—for the child's own good.

And who has never gone astray? King David admitted to it. The prophet Isaiah makes it universal—"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him [Jesus] the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6 KJV.) The apostle Paul seconds this with his statement in Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (KJV). So God allows the bad things to come so that we will turn to him, and, in so turning, find grace, love, hope, peace, joy, and abundant and eternal life—the very things my friend Vickie found.

God's purpose in this kind of bad thing is to prove three things to us:

1. He is able to deliver, sustain, rescue, and bless us;
2. His love for us is sure, steadfast, and enduring; and
3. He is a worthy and wonderful companion with whom we have the privilege of entering into a covenant relationship.

In this covenant relationship, he is the stronger, and we are the weaker; he is the protector, and we are the protected; he is the one who works all things "after the counsel of his own will" (Ephesians 1:11 KJV), together for our good (Romans 8:28), and we are "his workmanship [poem], created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Ephesians 2:10 KJV).

## All Things—Good and Bad

So, regardless of what type of bad thing we face, God will work it for good, as we trust in him and take it from his hand. He even works the good things together for our good. It's a matter of our yielding to him, much like a lump of clay yields to the potter's hands, letting the potter fashion what he wants to from that lump of clay.

## The Potter and the Clay

I love the potter and the clay metaphor used by several of the Old Testament prophets. You can find it in Isaiah 45:9; 64:8; and Jeremiah 18:1–6. Isaiah 45:9 asks, "Shall the clay say to him that forms it, 'What are you making?'" (NKJV). Imagine a clay vessel, being formed on the wheel, asking the potter what he's doing, as though the vessel should be consulted on how it is made.

Correspondingly, believers should not ask God what he is doing in their life. Part of the pottery process is firing the object in the kiln (sometimes more than once). So, also, being "tried

in the fire" is a part of the process of God's work in us. Peter speaks of this in 1 Peter 4:12, saying, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you" (NKJV). He also says that many trials are "much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire," that they would result in "praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7 NKJV).

In other words, when we feel the heat of various kinds of bad things, we are actually feeling the work of God in our lives, like the potter working with the clay and firing it whenever it is necessary to perfect the vessel. Job nails it when he says, regarding the work of God in his life, "When he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10 NKJV). Job had lost everything—children, property, and health; yet he knew that God, who is righteous and just, would make his life beautiful. And when Job had learned his lesson—that his own goodness could not stand up before God and that he was saved by the grace of God through faith—God restored to him double what he had before.

Peter and Paul make it clear that even if we don't see material blessings, that the eternal blessings make all trials worth it. Peter says, "But the God of all grace, who called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you" (1 Peter 5:10 NKJV). Paul tells us that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18 KJV), and that "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 KJV).

But there is a key to seeing the bad things as working together for good. We must view them as God views them. We must keep our eyes upon that eternal work and upon the eternal worker. Imagine a clay pot looking at the potter's hand, knowing that the potter is skillful enough to make even the roughest clay come out beautiful. When our view is like that, we can endure the bad things, whatever kind they are—natural disasters, evil deeds of others against us, persecution, or even the result of our own poor choice.

This view comes only "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18 KJV). Everything in this life—even the bad things that may happen to us—are going to end. What we have in eternity will last forever. When we have this assurance, we can face whatever comes.

I have posted this initial question in several discussion groups: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" I have received a variety of answers. There were several who have the assurance I just described. Some had reasoning that agreed with each of the kinds of bad things I have written about. One commenter expressed the view that all bad things are a result of the work of the devil. Another person simply attributed all bad things to the presence of sin. And yet another person incorrectly commented that we can't call anything good or bad, because what one person calls *bad* might be called *good* by another. This relativity brings confusion and chaos. It is a dangerous error and has corrupted our culture.

## Relatively Speaking

If we follow relativity to its logical conclusion, we could say that murder or rape may be good for one and bad for another; of course, it may be good for the perpetrator, who is sick (evil), while it is bad for the victim. If this idea was accepted by the criminal justice system, what a real mess our society would be in: nothing would be illegal or punishable. Prisons would be empty, but no one would be safe. The violent criminals would run rampant in the streets. Would you like to live in a society like that?

The scary thing is that our culture is moving toward that, as a major faction believes that immigration laws and borders should be ignored and that people who break those laws should be protected and given "sanctuary." Others believe we should defund the police. Many others make the criminal a "victim" or "hero," and the law enforcement officer the "criminal." And then, we have the emptying of prisons due to the Covid-19 situation.

In the interest of sanity, we do have to acknowledge some things as bad and others as good, even though good may come out of bad, as we've discussed earlier. For example, racism is always bad. But not everything is racism.

The relativistic view is taken by those who call nothing bad or wrong. They do this so they do not have to acknowledge an objective and absolute moral law or sovereign law-giver. Relativism may sound good on a base level, but it is a self-contradictory position; its logic fails basic tests. Two opposing views cannot both be true at the same time in the same place. As a known apologist has often said, "Even in India, people look both ways before crossing a street, because it is either the bus or them—not both."

Among the many definitions of "good" are these: Serving its purpose well, beneficial, having desired qualities, morally excellent, virtuous, well-behaved, dutiful, agreeable, kind, pleasant, wholesome, sound, reliable, safe, valid for, having worth, etc.

Among the many definitions of "bad" are these: Defective, inadequate, wicked, evil, not prosperous, decayed, rotten, criminal, corrupt, unwelcome, distressing, faulty, etc.

There weren't as many in my Webster's Dictionary for *bad* as there were for *good*. (That should tell us something as to which is preferable.)

Obviously, the same action, event, or item could not be both of those to the same person at the same time under the same circumstances. And if we were to discuss rape, for example, could we ever rationally say that it is beneficial, has desired qualities, is morally excellent, kind, pleasant, safe, or any of the other definitions of good? People might jokingly say that it is, in their vain attempt to escape objective moral law, but those people most likely have never been raped.

As I said in the beginning, those who are victims of a crime or survivors of a natural disaster will most usually admit that the event itself--experiencing it--was bad, even though good may have resulted. But that's a slightly different topic, isn't it? That's about events, actions, happenings. A forest fire will spark new growth eventually; it is a way that nature regenerates itself. As the saying goes: "Inside every cloud there is a silver lining."

Relativism is a little trickier when it is applied to morality (right and wrong) than it is when considering the goodness or badness of an event (like losing a job or other generally unfortunate circumstances). When considering moral behavior and matters of truth, relativism breaks down as a worldview. I deal with moral relativism, also known as situational ethics, in my nonfiction book, *Victory through Light: How to Overcome the Growing Cultural Darkness*.

So then, we can conclude that there is an objective standard by which to judge good and bad things and an objective moral law by which we discern which type of bad thing is happening.

## Purpose of the Bad Things

When we finish considering all the types of bad things that happen to people (both good and bad), we find ourselves wondering if there is a purpose to these bad things. We look for a worldview (a way of viewing life and the world) that gives meaning to all that happens. Some religious philosophies, such as Buddhism and Confucianism, offer some consolation regarding suffering for this lifetime. Neither of these offers a God who becomes human to redeem a fallen

humanity and provide eternal life. These and other worldviews do not give much in the way of eternal judgment for intentionally committed bad things.

Most worldviews, and especially those subscribing to atheism, give no purpose to bad things. They can only ask why a good God would allow bad things. They ask it in unbelief, knowing that they cannot answer the more appropriate question, "If there is no God, why do bad things happen?" Moreover, if their philosophy teaches that there is no God, they have no basis for determining what is good or bad, other than one's own self interest. We can think about this in the extreme: serial killers thrive on their crime, so from their point of view, the murder of a victim is a good thing; however, from the victim's point of view (and his or her family's view point), it is a bad thing. The same can be said of radicals who commit homicide bombings to take their own lives and as many others lives as possible.

Rejection of the one true God leaves no basis other than individual choice, or, as in some cases, societal mores, for determining good or bad, right or wrong. That leaves us in the conundrum expressed by this question: "In some societies, people love their neighbors; in others, they eat them. Which do you prefer?"

What it comes down to is that there is a good God, a God who loves His creation so much that He sent His Son, to die for us so that we could have a new life, full of purpose, meaning, and direction. We do that by believing in Him and accepting His substitutionary death for us. The new life enables us to avoid the kind of bad things that come from poor choices and wrong behavior, because we can follow God's will and word and live a holy life free of poor choices and their consequences.

This new life also guarantees that God will protect us from harm, deliver us out of harm, or keep us through the harm, all the while working in us for an eternal good and blessing, regardless of what happens on earth. The Judeo-Christian faith is the worldview that offers this hope and meaning.

Since our God sees the "end from the beginning" (Isaiah 46:10 KJV), we can trust Him with our lives. We can be satisfied knowing that the end is going to be wonderful, so we can take one step at a time and "walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7 KJV), fully persuaded that God is able to keep that which we have committed to Him, (2 Timothy 1:12), and knowing that God works all things together for good to them that love Him, "to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28 KJV).

So for Christians, "why bad things happen" is not as important as how we respond to the bad things and what is accomplished in our lives as a result of the bad things.

## Biblical Examples

In the Old Testament, Joseph responded in a good way to bad things. He gave God the glory for the evil his brothers did to him. And he refused to take revenge.

When King Saul sought to kill David, his solution was to seek God, as in Psalm 61:2: "From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I." (KJV)

What an excellent way to describe how we feel when bad things happen—our heart is overwhelmed. In those times, we need someone greater than ourselves to cling to. We can learn from Psalm 62, which tells us more about this "rock" to which David fled:

Truly my soul waits for God;  
 From Him comes my salvation.  
 He only is my rock and my salvation;  
 He is my defense [high place];  
 I shall not be greatly moved. . .  
 He only is my rock and my salvation;  
 He is my defense;  
 I shall not be moved.  
 In God is my salvation and my glory;  
 The rock of my strength,  
 And my refuge, is in God. (vv. 1-2, 6-7 NKJV)

David was so sure of this "rock" of his that he urged others to find refuge there too. Verse 8 says, "Trust in Him at all times, you people; / Pour out your heart before him; / God is a refuge for us. Selah [meditate on this]" (NKJV).

We can come to God, the "rock of salvation," because our Lord Jesus Christ is "higher than I." He is more significant than our jobs, property, families, friends, and bank accounts. He gives us the strength to face any and all problems. He gives us the comfort we need when bad things happen. He gives us the assurance of his unending and indestructible love for us. He meets the needs that encumber us, that "overwhelm" our hearts, our minds, our spirits, and our bodies. And he helps us endure the bad things that come as consequences for our bad choices and mistakes.

Other Psalms that express his readiness to help are Psalm 102, 142, and 143. The heading for Psalm 102 reads, "A Prayer of the afflicted, when he is overwhelmed, and poureth out his complaint

before the LORD” (KJV). The key is that we pour out our complaint to the Lord. We go before him in prayer, acknowledging our problems, pouring out what overwhelms us, and remembering that He can do something about it, that He loves us and desires to do something about it.

So, when bad things happen to us, we may not understand *why* at first; but we can know what to do about it—first. As the famous song "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," written by Joseph Scriven says,

"Can we find a friend so faithful  
Who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness –  
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

And that works. Because Jesus is ever faithful and always able. He is "the rock that is higher than I." And regardless of why the bad things happen, Jesus is ready to help. He works all things together for our good, just as a potter makes each lump of clay into a unique vessel.

## Exception

What if you don't believe in God? What if you don't look to Jesus to help you? Then the best you can do is know that bad things happen to everyone, even to people whose lives in public may appear ideal and always successful. When the bad things happen to you, you can seek help from available resources, take the trouble as a way to strengthen yourself, and "build a bridge and get over it."

And even then, your heart may be overwhelmed by the trouble. You may grow bitter and angry. You may complain against the God you don't even believe in. But know this, he is at the ready to come to your aid if you call on him. And he never turns anyone away. "Whosoever believes" doesn't leave room for rejection. See John 3:16 and Romans 10:13.

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