

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? **Suffering in the Context of Cosmic Conflict**

While attempting to change a tire, a young pastor is sucked beneath the wheels of a tractor-trailer truck as his family watches from their car. The husband and father of a missionary family in Mongolia is struck down with colon cancer and wastes away incontinent, in a wheelchair until the certain end. A fine Christian son chokes to death at home while his parents are away, unable to help. These are just a few of the many examples of my acquaintance with death when good people are provoked with evil in this world. Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation..." John 16:33. This issue is perplexing to many Christians and may be a stumbling block to those who would be Christians. However, the Scriptures are clear on the point: understanding is best achieved within the context of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan.

The conflict opens on the stage of Earth in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis chapter 3, we see the serpent who was "more subtle than any beast of the field" questioning God's command, "thou shalt not eat of it," i.e., the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In spite of God's clear instructions [we will examine the reason for the prohibition later], the serpent argued three points of worldly sophistry. First, it was good for food, second, it was pleasant to the eyes, and third, it was desired to make one wise. The serpent misrepresented God as withholding a higher plane of existence from humankind ("your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods").

Who is this deceiver who misrepresents God as evil and evil as good? What is the history of the relationship between the serpent and God that causes him to war against God, trying to pervert His marvelous new creation? What conflicts made these two such enemies? The answer is partially found in the most clear terms in Revelation chapter 12. Verse 7 says, "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, *that old serpent*, called the Devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."

Although we won't encumber this presentation with the supporting evidence, it is easy to demonstrate that Michael is Christ. (His pre-existence before the Creation of the world is a biblical principle. In fact, Christ is one of the agents of our Creation.) The text interprets itself when it tells us that Satan is "that old serpent." Thus, one can conclude that before the Garden of Eden, Satan was in heaven and had a following of angels. There was some conflict, a disagreement of cosmic magnitude, that resulted in Satan being cast to Earth along with his angel following. The enmity resulting from the conflict and Satan's defeat resulted in a war against what God loved most - his new creation, humankind.

The Bible does not give all the details of the origins of the heavenly conflict, but we are provided a glimpse into the situation in Isaiah 14:12, "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cast down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most high." Most commentators agree that Lucifer is Satan's original name in heaven, before he was cast down to the Earth. Although a created being himself (as we will see), Lucifer desired to be like God. He apparently campaigned for greater status, taking for himself the prerogatives of God. He was able to convince a large number of angels to follow his twisted thinking.

Again, in Ezekiel 28:15, "Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee. ... thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by

reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground” Lucifer, “the anointed cherub that covereth” (v. 14), became proud and desired to be like God. When his misrepresentations about God were unmasked in heaven, he was cast down to Earth. At first, God limited Satan’s access to humanity to the vicinity of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God desired that his people only know good, so he warned them to stay away from the tree. No doubt, he explained some of the history of Lucifer and asked them to be faithful while providing the rich blessings of His garden and daily presence for humankind to enjoy.

However, there was a cancer in the universe. Sin had been born as a result of the free will instilled in all of the angels, including Lucifer. God did not desire automatons. Everyone must have a choice to obey or disobey. Satan chose to disobey. God could not just eliminate the cancer. That would have invalidated His free-will design, and it might have validated some of Lucifer’s misrepresentations. Therefore, God needed a plan to fully reveal the rottenness of sin to the extent that his created beings would forever turn from it and serve Him with love of their own free will.

Therefore, Satan was provided a forum to work out the principles of his kingdom. God did not just turn over the human race to Satan. He provided a test - a very trivial test. Can humans obey God because they love Him, not fully understanding all the implications of God’s requirements? The tree was not essential for food or their happiness and God asked them to stay away. But there, Satan deceived Eve with arguments more clever than she had anticipated. [Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. 1 Peter 5:8]

In God’s great love, he did not execute the death sentence immediately. Adam and Eve began to die that day, but they would live for many hundreds of years. But on the very day they sinned, a way was provided for them to have eternal life. Only a hint was given at first: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” Genesis 3:15. The rest of Scriptures amplify the plan of salvation by which the holy requirements of God’s laws can be maintained while the penalty for our failure is paid in full by Christ himself. Satan continues to misrepresent the plan of salvation, claiming that Christ’s death on the cross did away with the law, where in reality, Christ’s death establishes the immutability of God’s law. If the law could be done away with, Christ would not have had to die, paying our penalty. “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill, Matthew 5:17.

Therefore, when we see tragedy strike God’s people, one of two reasons are behind it. First, God has set up a world of cause and effect. If it were not so, there would be chaos and no one would learn from their mistakes. Therefore, when someone gets careless and falls off a building, unless God intervenes in a miraculous way, the consequences await at the bottom regardless of the individual’s standing before God. Therefore, bad things happen to good people due to cause and effect to maintain order in the universe. Similarly, good things happen to “bad people.” He makes “his sun to rise on the evil and on the good” and sends “rain on the just and on the unjust,” Matthew 5:45, demonstrating his good will to all in hope that they will be saved.

Secondly, and more important to the theme of this discussion, bad things happen to good people during the course of the conflict between Christ and Satan. A window on the spiritual world and how it is involved in human suffering is opened to us in the book of Job. Verse six of chapter 1 states, “Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.” Although we don’t know the particulars of this meeting, it is logical to think that perhaps the sons of God are the representatives of the worlds God has created. Adam, sometimes described as the son of God, would have been Earth’s representative, but his sin eliminated him from the councils of heaven. Apparently, Satan, claiming to represent the humankind that he had conquered, was allowed to attend. Satan (verses 9-11) makes the charge that the only reason Job lives for God is because God protects and

blesses Job. As events unfold from there, we see God allowing Satan to cause Job's suffering to test and perhaps purify Job.

Notice that Satan does the attack, but God is in control and allows things to happen for the fulfillment of his infinite purposes. One of God's purposes is to reveal the sickness of Satan's way of government. Another is to purify and prepare a people fit for eternal life. ("All things work together for good for them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose," Romans 8:28.) Nothing can happen to us that God does not know about and allows for our best good. Even the most terrible suffering can result in good on a cosmic scale, in a way we cannot discern because of our limited spiritual insights.

Sometimes God elects to deliver His people from the trials. The three Hebrew young men thrown into the fiery furnace were delivered from pain and destruction but not from the trauma. But Jesus himself was in the furnace with them to sustain their faith (Daniel 4:25). Other times, there is no deliverance, but Jesus himself is still there praying to the Father on our behalf. With regard to trials Peter was to undergo, Jesus said, "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not" Luke 22:31, 32. Note that Jesus didn't pray to deliver Peter from the trial but that Peter might be sustained through the trial. "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee," Isaiah 43:2.

It is obviously in God's purposes to use trials as His instruments of instruction. Man was created in the image of God. But when man sinned, the image of God was replaced with the image of Satan. Mankind is inherently selfish. ("The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Jeremiah 17:9) Man needed a different instructor than was originally planned. "Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee" Genesis 3:18. God didn't curse the ground in a fit of rage, but in His infinite and loving wisdom, provided for mankind just what the sickness of sin needed: trials and tribulation.

If we understand this great controversy between Christ and Satan, we can have faith that all things do indeed work together for good and we, like Paul and Peter, can rejoice in trials and sorrows:

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. 1 Peter 4:12, 13

We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy ghost which is given unto us. Romans 5:3-5