***When Bad Things Happen to Good People***

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**Introduction**

**Why I Wrote This Book**

This is a very personal book, written by someone who believes in God and in the goodness of the world, someone who has spent most of his life trying to help other people believe, and was compelled by a personal tragedy to rethink everything he had been taught about God and God's way.

Our son Aaron had just passed his third birthday when our daughter Ariel was born. My wife and I had been concerned about his health from the time he stopped gaining weight at the age of eight months, and from the time his hair started falling out after he turned one year old. We discovered that the local pediatrician was doing research in problems of children’s growth, and we introduced him to Aaron. Two months later- the day our daughter was born- he visited my wife in the hospital, and told us that our son's condition was called progeria, “rapid aging.” He went on to say that Aaron would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like a little old man while he was still a child, and would die in his early teens.

How does one handle news like that? It didn't make sense. I had been a good person. I had tried to do what was right in the sight of God. More than that, I was living a more religiously committed life than most people I knew, people who had large, healthy families. I believed that I was following God's ways and doing His work. How could this be happening to my family? If God existed, if He was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He do this to me?

And even if I could persuade myself that I deserved this punishment for some sin of neglect or pride that I was not aware of, on what grounds did Aaron have to suffer? He was an innocent child, a happy, outgoing three-year-old. Why should he have to suffer physical and psychological pain every day of his life? Why should he have to be stared at, pointed at, wherever he went? Why should he be condemned to grow into adolescence, see other boys and girls beginning to date, and realize that he would never know marriage or fatherhood? It simply didn't make sense.

Every year, on Aaron's birthday, my wife and I would celebrate. We would rejoice in his growing up and growing in skill. But we would be gripped by the cold foreknowledge that another year’s passing brought us closer to the day when he would be taken from us.

I knew then that one day I would write this book. I would write it out of my own need to put into words some of the most important things I have come to believe and know. And I would write it to help other people who might one day find themselves in a similar predicament. I would write it for all those people who wanted to go on believing, but whose anger at God made it hard for them to hold on to their faith and be comforted by religion.

I am fundamentally a religious man who has been hurt by life, and I wanted to write a book that could be given to the person who has been hurt by life- by death, by illness or injury, by rejection or disappointment- and who knows in his heart that if there is justice in the world, he deserved better. What can God mean to such a person? Where can he turn for strength and hope? If you are such a person, if you want to believe in God’s goodness and fairness but find it hard because of the things that have happened to you and to people you care about, and if this book helps you do that, then I will have succeeded in distilling some blessing out of Aaron’s pain and tears.

**Chapter 1**

**Why Do the Righteous Suffer?**

There is only one question which really matters: why do bad things happen to good people? Virtually every meaningful conversation I have ever had with people on the subject of God and religion has either started with this question, or gotten around to it before long.

Consider the case of Ron, a young pharmacist who ran a drug store with an older business partner. When Ron bought into the business, his older colleague told him that the store had recently been the target of a series of holdups by young drug addicts looking for drugs and cash. One day, when Ron was almost ready to close up, a teenage drug addict pulled a small-caliber handgun on him and asked for drugs and money. He went to open the cash register, his hands trembling as he did so. As he turned, he stumbled and reached for the counter to brace himself. The robber thought he was going for a gun, and fired. The bullet went through Ron’s abdomen and lodged in his spinal cord. Doctors removed it, but the damage had been done. Ron would never walk again.

Friends tried to console him. Some told him of experimental drugs doctors were using on paraplegics, or of miraculous spontaneous recoveries they had read about. Others tried to help him understand what had happened to him, and to answer his question, “Why me?”

“I have to believe,” one friend said, “that everything that happens in life, happens for a purpose. Somehow or other, everything that happens to us is meant for our good. You were always a pretty cocky guy, popular with girls, had flashy cars, confident you were going to make a lot of money. You never really took the time to worry about the people who couldn't keep up with you. Maybe this is God's way of teaching you a lesson, making you more thoughtful, more sensitive to others.”

The friend wanted to be comforting, to make sense of this senseless accident. But if you were Ron, what would your reaction have been? Ron remembers thinking that if he hadn't been confined to a hospital bed, he would have punched the other man. What right did a normal, healthy person- a person who would soon be driving home, walking upstairs, looking forward to playing tennis- have to tell him that what had happened to him was good and was in his best interest?

If we cannot satisfactorily explain suffering by saying we deserve what we get, or by viewing it as a “cure” for our faults, can we accept the interpretation of tragedy as a test? Many parents of dying children are urged to read the twenty-second chapter of the book of Genesis to help them understand and accept their burden. In that chapter, God orders Abraham to take his son Isaac, whom he loves, and offer him to God as a human sacrifice. The chapter begins with the words “It came to pass after all these matters that the Lord tested Abraham.” God had Abraham go through that ordeal to test his loyalty and the strength of his faith. When he passed the test, God promised to reward him liberally for the strength he had shown.

For those who have difficulty with the notion of a God who plays such sadistic games with His most faithful follower, proponents of this view explain that God knows how the story will end. He knows that we will pass the test, as Abraham did, with our faith intact (though, in Abraham’s case, the child did not die). He puts us to the test so that *we* will discover how strong and faithful we are.

I was the parent of a handicapped child for fourteen years, until his death. I was not comforted by this notion that God had singled me out because he recognized some special spiritual strength within me and knew that I would be able to handle it better. It didn't make me feel “privileged,” nor did it help me understand why God has to send handicapped children into the lives of a hundred thousand unsuspecting families every year.

Writer Harriet Sarnoff Schiff distilled her pain and tragedy into an excellent book, *The Bereaved Parent*. She remembers that when her young son died during an operation to correct a congenital heart malfunction, her clergyman took her aside and said, “I know that this is a painful time for you. But I know that you will get through it all right, because God never sends us more of a burden than we can bear. God only let this happen to you because He knows that you were strong enough to handle it.” Harriet Schiff remembers her reaction to those words: “If only I was a weaker person, Robbie would still be alive.”

Does God never ask more of us than we can endure? My experience, alas, has been otherwise. I have seen people crack under the strain of unbearable tragedy. I have seen marriages break up after the death of a child, because the parents blamed each other for not taking proper care or for carrying the defective gene, or simply because the memories they shared were unendurably painful. I have seen some people made noble and sensitive through suffering, but I have seen many more people grow cynical and bitter. I have seen people become jealous of those around them, unable to take part in the routines of normal living. I have seen cancers and automobile accidents take the life of one member of a family, and functionally end the lives of five others, who could never again be the normal, cheerful people they were before the disaster struck. If God is testing us, He must know by now that many of us fail the test. If he is only giving us burdens we can bear, I have seen him miscalculate far too often.

When all else fails, some people try to explain suffering by believing that it comes to liberate us from a world of pain and lead us to a better place. I received a phone call one day informing me that a five-year-old boy in our neighborhood had run out into the street after a ball, had been hit by a car and killed. I didn't know the boy; his family was not part of the congregation. But several children from the congregation had known him and played with him. Their mothers attended the funeral, and some of them told me about it afterwards.

In the eulogy, the family’s clergyman had said, “This is not a time for sadness or tears. This is a time for rejoicing, because Michael has been taken out of this world of sin and pain with his innocent soul unstained by sin. He is in a happier land now where there is no pain and no grief; let us thank God for that.”

I heard that, and I felt so bad for Michael's parents. Not only had they lost a child without warning, they were being told by the representative of their religion that they should rejoice in the fact that he had died so young and so innocent, and I couldn't believe that they felt much like rejoicing at that moment. They felt hurt, they felt angry, they felt that God had been unfair to them, and here was God's spokesman telling them to be grateful to God for what had happened.

Sometimes in our reluctance to admit that there is unfairness in the world, we try to persuade ourselves that what has happened is not really bad. We only think that it is. It is only our selfishness that makes us cry because five-year-old Michael is with God instead of living with us.

Sometimes, because our souls yearn for justice, because we so desperately want to believe that God will be fair to us, we fasten our hopes on the idea that life in this world is not the only reality. Somewhere beyond this life is another world where “the last shall be first” and those whose lives were cut short here on earth will be reunited with those they loved, and we'll spend eternity with them.

Neither I nor any other living person can know anything about the reality of that hope. We know that our physical bodies decay after we die. I for one believe that the part of us which is not physical, the part we call the soul or personality, does not and cannot die.

Belief in a world to come where the innocent are compensated for their suffering can help people endure the unfairness of life in this world without losing faith. But it can also be an excuse for not being troubled or outraged by injustice around us, and not using our God given intelligence to try to do something about it. The dictate of practical wisdom for people in our situation might be to remain mindful that our lives continue in some form after death in a form our earthly imaginations cannot conceive of.

Could it be that God does not cause the bad things that happen to us? Could it be that He doesn't decide which families shall give birth to a handicapped child, that He did not single out Ron to be crippled by a bullet, but rather that He stands ready to help them and us cope with our tragedies if we could only get beyond the feelings of guilt and anger that separate us from Him? Could it be that “How could God do this to me?” is really the wrong question for us to ask?

The most profound and complete consideration of human suffering in the Bible, perhaps in all of literature, is the Book of Job. It is to an examination of that book that we now turn.

**Chapter 2**

**The Story of a Man Named Job**

About twenty-five hundred years ago, a man lived whose name we will never know, but who has entrenched the minds and lives of human beings ever since. He was a sensitive man who saw good people getting sick and dying around him while proud and selfish people prospered. He heard all the learned, clever, and pious attempts to explain life, and he was as dissatisfied with them as we are today. Because he was a person of rare literary and intellectual gifts, he wrote a long philosophical poem on the subject of why God lets bad things happen to good people. This poem appears in the Bible as the Book of Job.

I have been fascinated with the Book of Job ever since I learned of its existence, and have studied it, reread it, and taught it any number of times. It has been said that just as every actor yearns to play Hamlet, every Bible student yearns to write a commentary on the Book of Job. It is a hard book to understand, a profound and beautiful book on the most profound of subjects, the question of why God lets good people suffer.

Who was Job, and what is the book that bears his name? A long, long time ago, scholars believe, there must have been a well-known folk story, a kind of morality fable told to reinforce people's religious sentiments, about a pious man named Job. Job was so good, so perfect, that you realize at once that you were not reading about a real life person. This is a “once-upon-a-time” story about a good man who suffered.

One day, the story goes, Satan appears before God to tell him about all the sinful things people were doing on earth. God says to Satan, “Did you notice my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him, a thoroughly good man who never sins.” Satan answers God, “Of course Job is pious and obedient. You make it worth his while, showering riches and blessings on him. Take away those blessings and see how long he remains your obedient servant.”

God accepts Satan’s challenge. Without in any way telling Job what is going on, God destroys Job’s house and cattle and kills his children. He afflicts Job with boils all over his body, so that his every moment becomes physical torture. Job’s wife urges him to curse God, even if that means God striking him dead. He can't do anything worse to Job than He already has done. Three friends come to console Job, and they too urge him to give up his piety, if this is the reward it brings him. But Job remains steadfast in his faith. Nothing that happens to him can make him give up his devotion to God. At the end, God appears, scolds the friends for their advice, and rewards Job for his faithfulness. God gives him a new home, a new fortune, and new children. The moral of the story is: when hard times befall you, don't be tempted to give up your faith in God. He has His reasons for what He is doing, and if you hold onto your faith long enough, He will compensate you for your suffering.

Over the generations, many people have been told that story. Some, no doubt, were comforted by it. Others were shamed into keeping their doubts and complaints to themselves after hearing Job's answer. Our anonymous author was bothered by it. What kind of God would that story have us believe in, who would kill innocent children and visit unbearable anguish on His most devoted follower in order to prove a point, in order, we almost feel, to win a bet with Satan? What kind of religion is the story urging on us, which delights in blind obedience and calls it sinful to protest against injustice? He was so upset with this pious old fable that he took it, turned it inside out, and recast it as a philosophical poem in which the characters’ positions are reversed. In the poem, Job does complain against God, and now it is the friends who uphold the conventional theology, the idea that “no ills befall the righteous.”

In an effort to comfort Job, whose children have died and who was suffering from the boils, the three friends say all the traditional, pious things. In essence, they preach the point of view contained in the original Job-fable: Don't lose faith, despite these calamities. We have a loving Father in Heaven, and He will see to it that the good prosper and the wicked are punished.

Job, who has probably spoken these same words innumerable times to other mourners, realizes for the first time how hollow and offensive they are. What do you mean, He will see to it that the good prosper and the wicked are punished?! Are you implying that my children were wicked and that is why they died? Are you saying that I am wicked, and that is why all this is happening to me? Where was I so terrible? What did I do that was so much worse than anything you did, that I should suffer so much worse of fate?

The friends are startled by this outburst. They respond by saying that a person can't expect God to tell him what he is being punished for.

And so the argument continues. Job doesn't claim to be perfect, but says that he has tried, more than most people, to live a good and decent life. How can God be a loving God if He is constantly spying on people, ready to pounce on any imperfection in an otherwise good record, and use that to justify punishment? And how can God be a just God if so many wicked people are not punished as horribly as Job is?

The dialogue becomes heated, even angry. The friends say: Job, you really had us fooled. You gave us the impression that you were as pious and religious as we are. But now we see how you throw religion overboard the first time something unpleasant happens to you. You are proud, arrogant, impatient, and blasphemous. No wonder God is doing this to you.

Let me suggest that the author of the book of Job takes the position which neither Job nor his friends take. He believes in God's goodness and in Job’s goodness. Bad things do happen to good people in this world, but it is not God who wills it. God would like people to get what they deserve in life, but He cannot always arrange it. Forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good, the author of the book of Job chooses to believe in God's goodness.

Innocent people do suffer misfortunes in this life. Things happen to them far worse than they deserve- they lose their jobs, they get sick, their children suffer or make them suffer. But when it happens, it does not represent God punishing them for something they did wrong. The misfortunes do not come from God at all.

**Chapter 3**

**Sometimes There Is No Reason**

Some people will find the hand of God behind everything that happens. I visit a woman in the hospital whose car was run into by a drunken driver running a red light. Her vehicle was totally demolished, but miraculously she escaped with only two cracked ribs and a few superficial cuts from flying glass. She looks up at me from her hospital bed and says, “Now I know there is a God. If I could come out of that alive and in one piece, it must be because He is looking out for me up there.” I smile and keep quiet, running the risk of letting her think that I agree with her, because it is not the time or place for a theology seminar. But my mind goes back to a funeral I conducted two weeks earlier, for a young husband and father who died in a similar drunk-driver collision; and I remember another case, a child killed by a hit-and-run driver while roller skating and all the newspaper accounts of lives cut short in automobile accidents. The woman before me may believe that she is alive because God wanted her to survive, and I am not inclined to talk her out of it, but what would she or I say to those of other families? That they were less worthy then she, less valuable in God’s sight? That God wanted them to die at that particular time and manner, and did not choose to spare them?

When the law of physics and metal fatigue cause a wing to fall off an airplane, or when human carelessness causes engine failure, so that a plane crashes, killing two hundred people, was it God's will that those two hundred should chance to be on a doomed plane that day? And if the two hundred and first passenger had a flat tire on the way to the airport and missed the flight, grumbling and cursing his luck as he saw the plane take off without him, was it God's will that he should live while the others died? If it were, I would have to wonder about what kind of message God was sending us with His apparently arbitrary acts of condemning and saving.

We will simply have to learn to live with it, sustained and comforted by the knowledge that the earthquake and the accident, like the murder and the robbery, are not the will of God, but represent that aspect of reality which stands independent of His will, and which angers and saddens God even as it angers and saddens us.

**Chapter 4**

**No Exceptions for Nice People**

Laws of nature do not make exceptions for nice people. A bullet has no conscience; neither does a malignant tumor or an automobile gone out of control. That is why good people get sick and get hurt as much as anyone.

I don't believe that an earthquake that kills thousands of innocent victims without reason is an act of God. It is an act of nature. Nature is morally blind, without values. It churns along, following its own laws, not caring who or what gets in the way. But God is not morally blind. God stands for justice, for fairness, for compassion. For me, the earthquake is not an “act of God.” the act of God is the courage of people to rebuild their lives after the earthquake, and the rush of others to help them in whatever way they can.

If a bridge collapses, if a dam breaks, if a wing falls off an airplane and people die, I cannot see that as God’s doing. I cannot believe that God wanted all those people to die at that moment, or that He wanted some of them to die and had no choice but to condemn the others along with them. I believe that these calamities are all acts of nature, and that there is no moral reason for those particular victims to be singled out for punishment.

I don't know why one person gets sick, and another does not, but I can only assume that some natural laws which we don't understand are at work. I cannot believe that God “sends” illness to a specific person for a specific reason. I don't believe in a God who has a weekly quota of malignant tumors to distribute, and to find out who deserves most or who could handle it best. “What did I do to deserve this?” is an understandable outcry from a sick and suffering person, but it is really the wrong question. Being sick or being healthy is not a matter of what God decides that we deserve. The better question is “If this has happened to me, what do I do now, and who is there to help me do it?” It becomes much easier to take God seriously as the source of moral values if we don't hold him responsible for all the unfair things that happen in the world.

Job asked questions about God, but he did not need lessons in theology. He needed sympathy and compassion and the reassurance that he was a good person and a cherished friend. My neighbor asked me questions about his illness, but we misunderstand his need if we respond with lessons in biology and genetics. Like Job, he needs to be told that what is happening to him is dreadfully unfair. He needs help in keeping his mind and spirit strong, so that he can look forward to a future in which he will be able to think and plan and decide, even if he can't walk or swim, and will not have to become a helpless, dependent cripple even if he loses certain skills.

I don't know why my friend and neighbor is sick and dying and in constant pain. From my religious perspective, I cannot tell him that God has His reasons for sending him this terrible fate, or that God must specially love him or admire his bravery to test him in this way. I can only tell him that the God I believe in did not send the disease and does not have a miraculous cure that He is withholding. But in a world in which we all possess immortal spirits in fragile and vulnerable bodies, the God I believe in gives strength and courage to those who, unfairly and through no fault of their own, suffer pain and the fear of death. I can help him remember that he is more than a crippled body. He is more than a man with a debilitating illness. He is a man with a loving wife and children, with many friends, and with enough iron in his soul to remain a living person in the fullest sense of the word until the very last day.

**Chapter 5.**

**God Leaves Us Room to Be Human**

One of the most important things that any religion can teach us is what it means to be human. At the very beginning of the Bible we learn about being human in the Book of Genesis. We learn that we are made “in the image and likeness of God.” It means being free to make choices and instead of doing whatever our instincts would tell us to do. It means knowing that some choices are good, and others are bad, and it is our job to know the difference.

In order to let us be free, in order to let us be human, God has to leave us free to choose to do right or to do wrong. If we are not free to choose evil, then we are not free to choose good either.

None of us can read God's mind, to know why, at a certain point in the evolutionary process, He had a new kind of creature emerge, a morally free animal who could choose to be good or bad. But He did, and the world has seen a lot of nobility and a lot of cruelty ever since.

Why, then, do bad things happen to good people? One reason is that our being human leaves us free to hurt each other, and God can't stop us without taking away the freedom that makes us human. Human beings can cheat each other, rob each other, hurt each other, and God can only look down in pity and compassion at how little we have learned over the ages about how human beings should behave. This line of reasoning helps me understand that monstrous eruption of evil we speak of as the Holocaust, the death of millions of innocent people at the hands of Adolf Hitler. When people ask, “Where was God in all Auschwitz? How could He have permitted the Nazis to kill so many innocent men, women, and children?,” my response is that it was not God who caused it. It was caused by human beings choosing to be cruel to their fellow men.

To try to explain the Holocaust or any suffering, as God’s will is to side with the executioner rather than with his victim, and to claim the God does the same.

Why did six million Jews, and several million other innocent victims, die in Hitler's death camps? Who was responsible? We fall back on the idea of human freedom to choose. Man, we discovered, is that unique creature whose behavior is not “programmed.” He is free to choose to be good, which means he is free to choose to be evil.

The cornerstone of my religious outlook is the belief that human beings *are* free to choose the direction their life will take. I insist that every adult, no matter how unfortunate a childhood he had, is free to make choices about his life. If we are not free, if we are bound by circumstances and experiences, then we are no different from the animal who was bound by instinct. To say of Hitler, to say of any criminal, that he did not choose to be bad but was a victim of his upbringing, is to make all morality, all discussion of right and wrong, impossible.

Where was God while all this was going on? Why did He not intervene to stop it? Why didn't He strike Hitler dead in 1939 and spare millions of lives and untold suffering, or why didn't He send an earthquake to demolish the gas chambers? Where was God? I have to believe that He was with the victims, and not with the murderers, but that He does not control man's choosing between good and evil. I have to believe that the tears and prayers of the victims aroused God's compassion, but having given man freedom to choose, including the freedom to choose to hurt his neighbor, there was nothing God could do to prevent it.

The last word, appropriately comes from a survivor of Auschwitz:

It never occurred to me questioning God doings or lack of doings while I was an inmate of Auschwitz, although of course I understand others did…. I was no less or no more religious because of what the Nazis did to us; and I believe my faith in God was not undermined in the least. It never occurred to me to associate the calamity we were experiencing with God, to blame Him, or to believe in Him less or ceased believing in Him at all because He didn't come to our aid. God doesn't owe us that, or anything. We owe our lives to Him. If someone believes God is responsible for the death of six million because He didn't somehow do something to save them, he's got his thinking reversed. We owe God our lives for the few or many years we live, and we have the duty to worship Him and do as He commands us. That's what we're here on earth for, to be in God service, to do God's bidding.

**Chapter 6**

**God Helps Those Who Stop Hurting Themselves**

One of the worst things that happens to a person who has been hurt by life is that he tends to compound the damage by hurting himself a second time. Not only is he the victim of rejection, bereavement, injury, or bad luck; he often feels the need to see himself as a bad person who had this coming to him, and because of that drives away people who try to come close to him and help him. Too often, in our pain and confusion, we instinctively do the wrong thing. We don't feel we deserve to be helped, so we let guilt, anger, jealousy, hence self-imposed loneliness make a bad situation even worse.

Do you remember Jobs comforters from the biblical story? When the three friends came to visit Job, they genuinely wanted to comfort him for his losses and his illness. But they did almost everything wrong, and ended up making him feel worse. Can we learn from their mistakes what a person needs when he has been hurt by life, and how we as friends and neighbors can be helpful to him?

Their first mistake was to think that when Job said, “Why is God doing this to me?” he was asking a question, and that they would be helping him by answering his question, by explaining why God was doing it. In reality, Job’s words were not a theological question at all, but a cry of pain. There should have been an exclamation point after those words, not a question mark. What Job needed from his friends- what he was really asking for when he said “Why is God doing this to me?”- it was not theology, but sympathy. He did not really want them to explain God to him, and he certainly did not want them to show him where his theology was faulty. He wanted them to tell him that he was in fact a good person, and that the things that were happening to him were terribly tragic and unfair. But the friends got so bogged down talking about God that they almost forgot about Job, except to tell him that he must have done something pretty awful to deserve this fate at the hands of a righteous God.

Because the friends had never been in Job’s position, they could not realize how unhelpful, how offensive it was for them to be judging Job, to be telling him he should not cry and complain so much. Even if they themselves had experienced similar losses, they would still have no right to sit in judgment of Job’s grief. It is hard to know what to say to a person who has been struck by tragedy, but it is easier to know what not to say. Anything critical of the mourner (“Don't take it so hard,” “Try to hold back your tears, you're upsetting people”) is wrong. Anything which tries to minimize the mourner’s pain (“It's probably for the best,” “It could be a lot worse,” “She's better off now”) is likely to be misguided and unappreciated. Anything which asks the mourner to disguise or reject his feelings (“We have no right to question God,” “God must love you to have selected you for this burden”) is wrong as well.

Job needed sympathy more than he needed advice, even good and correct advice. There would be a time and place for that later. He needed compassion, the sense that others felt his pain with him, more than he needed learned theological explanations about God's ways. He needed physical comforting, people sharing their strength with him, holding him rather than scolding him.

He needed friends who would permit him to be angry, to cry and to scream, much more than he needed friends who would urge him to be an example of patience and piety to others. He needed people to say, “Yes what happened to you is terrible and makes no sense,” not people who would say, “Cheer up, Job, it's not all that bad.” And that was where his friends let him down. The phrase “Job's comforters” has come into the language to describe people who mean to help, but who are more concerned with their own needs and feelings than they are with those of the other person, and so end up only making things worse.

When things don't turn out as we would like them to, it is very tempting to assume that had we done things differently, the story would have had a happier ending. Clergymen know that anytime there is a death, the survivors will feel guilty. Survivors feel guilty for still being alive while the loved one is dead. They feel guilty when they think of all the kind words they never got around to saying to the deceased, and the good things they never found time to do for her. Indeed, many of the mourning rituals in all religions are designed to help the bereaved get rid of these irrational feelings of guilt for a tragedy they did not in fact cause. But the sense of guilt, the sense of “it's my fault,” seems to be universal.

Sometimes, of course, a feeling of guilt is appropriate and necessary. Sometimes we *have* caused the sorrow in our lives and ought to take responsibility. The man who sat in my office one day, telling me how he left his wife and young children to marry his secretary, and asking me how I could help him get over his guilt for what he had done to his children, was making an improper request of me. He *should* have felt guilty, and he should have been thinking in terms of making amends to his first family rather than looking for a way to shake his sense of guilt. A sense of our inadequacies and failings, a recognition that we could be better people than we usually are, is one of the forces for moral growth and improvement in our society. An appropriate sense of guilt makes people try to be better. But an excessive sense of guilt, a tendency to blame ourselves for things which are clearly not our fault, robs us of our self-esteem and perhaps of our capacity to grow and to act.

Whenever bad things happen to good people, there is likely to be the feeling that we might have prevented the misfortune if we had acted differently. And there will almost certainly be feelings of anger. It seems to be instinctive to become angry when we hurt. One of the important questions when we are hurt and angry is, what do we do with our anger?

Sometimes, if we can't find another person to dump our anger on, we turn it on ourselves. The textbook definition of depression is anger turned inward instead of being discharged outward. I suspect we have all known people who became depressed after a death, a divorce, a rejection or loss of a job. They stayed home, slept till noon, neglected their personal appearance, and spurned all efforts at friendship. This is depression, our anger at being hurt turned inward onto ourselves. If we blame ourselves, we want to hurt ourselves, to punish ourselves for what we messed up.

And sometimes we are angry at God. Because we were brought up to believe that everything that happens is His will, we hold Him responsible for what happened, or at the very least for not having prevented it from happening.

Actually, being angry at God won't hurt God, and neither will it provoke Him to take measures against you. If it makes us feel better to vent our anger at Him over a painful situation, we are free to do it. The only thing wrong with doing it is that what happened to us was not really God's fault.

What do we do with our anger when we have been hurt? The goal, if we can achieve it, would be to be *angry at the situation*, rather than at ourselves. Getting angry at ourselves makes us depressed. Being angry at other people scares them away and makes it harder for them to help us. Being angry at God erects a barrier between us and all the sustaining, comforting resources of religion that are there to help us at such times. Being angry at the situation, recognizing it as something rotten, unfair, and totally undeserved, shouting about it, denouncing it, crying over it, permits us to discharge the anger which is a part of being hurt, without making it harder for us to be helped.

Jealousy is almost as inevitable a part of being hurt by life as our guilt and anger. How can the injured person not feel jealous of people who may not deserve better, but have received better? How can the widow not be jealous of even her closest friends who still have a husband to go home to? How should the woman whose doctor has told her she will never be able to bear children react when her sister-in-law confides to her that something may have gone wrong and she may be pregnant a fourth time?

Some psychologists traced the origins of jealousy to sibling rivalry. As children, we compete with our brothers and sisters for our parents’ limited love and attention. It is so important to us, not only to be treated well, but to be treated better than the others. When we grow up, we may never entirely outgrow those childhood habits of competition, of needing to be reassured that we are “more loved,” even as we may never totally outgrow the habit of thinking of God as a Heavenly Parent. For us the suffer an accident or bereavement is bad enough. But for us to suffer it while those around us don't is even worse, because that awakens all the old childhood competitiveness in us, and seems to proclaim to all that God loves them more than He loves us.

We often feel resentful towards others for having their good health, their families, their jobs when we have lost ours. We can even understand that as we resent the good fortune of the people around us, we make it harder for them to help us, because they sense the resentment and the estrangement. We hurt ourselves more than anyone else by feeling jealous, and we know it. But we still feel it.

There was an old Chinese tale about the woman whose only son died. In her grief, she went to the holy man and said, “What prayers, what magical incantations do you have to bring my son back to life?” Instead of sending her away or reasoning with her, he said to her, “Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life.” The woman set off at once in search of that magical mustard seed. She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door, and said, “I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is very important to me.” They told her, “You’ve certainly come to the wrong place,” and began to describe all the tragic things that had recently befallen them. The woman said to herself, “Who is better able to help these poor unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?” She stayed to comfort them, then went on and searched for a home that had never known sorrow. But wherever she turned, in hovels and in palaces, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune. Ultimately, she became so involved in ministering to other people's grief that she forgot about her quest for the magical mustard seed, never realizing that it had in fact driven the sorrow out of her life.

Perhaps that is the only cure for jealousy, to realize that the people we resent and envy for having what we lack, probably have wounds and scars of their own. They may even be envying us. The married woman who tries to comfort her widowed neighbor may have reason to fear that her husband will lose his job. She may have a delinquent child to worry about. The pregnant sister-in-law may have gotten some disturbing news about her own health.

But everyone is our brother or sister in suffering. No one comes to us from a home which has never known sorrow. They come to help us because they too know what it feels like to be hurt by life.

I don't think we should confront one another with our troubles. (“You think you've got problems? Let me tell you my problems, and you'll realize how well off you are.”) That sort of competitiveness accomplishes nothing. It is as bad as the competitiveness that spawns sibling rivalry and jealousy in the first place. The afflicted person is not looking for an invitation to join the Suffering Olympics. But it would help if we remembered this: Anguish and heartbreak may not be distributed evenly throughout the world, but they are distributed very widely. Everyone gets his share. If we knew the facts, we would very rarely find someone whose life was to be envied.

**Chapter 7**

**God Can’t Do Everything, But He Can Do Some Important Things**

Neither can we ask God to change laws of nature for our benefit, to make fatal conditions less fatal or to change the inexorable course of an illness. Malignancies mysteriously disappear; incurable patients recover, and baffled doctors credit it to an act of God. All we can do in a case like this is echo the doctor's bewildered gratitude. We don't know why some people spontaneously recover from illnesses which kill or cripple others. We don't know why some people die in car crashes or plane crashes, while other people, sitting right next to them, walk away with a few cuts and bruises and a bad scare. I can't believe that God chooses to hear the prayers of some and not of others. There would be no discernable rhyme or reason to His doing that. No amount of research into the lives of those who died and those who survived would help us learn how to live or how to pray so that we too would win God's favor.

The first thing prayer does for us is to put us in touch with other people, people who share the same concerns, values, dreams, and pains that we do.

The primary purpose of religion at its earliest level was not to put people in touch with God, but put them in touch with one another. Religious rituals taught people how to share with their neighbors the experiences of birth and bereavement, of children marrying and parents dying. I think that is still what religion does best. We need to share our joys with other people, and we need even more to share our fears and our grief. And I firmly believe that knowing that people care *can* affect the course of a person's health.

Prayer, when it is offered in the right way, redeems people from isolation. It assures them that they need not feel alone and abandoned. It lets them know that they are part of a greater reality, with more depth, more hope, more courage, and more of a future than any individual could have by himself. One goes to a religious service, one recites the traditional prayers, not in order to find God (there are plenty of other places where he can be found), But to find a congregation, to find people with whom you can share that which means the most to you. From that point of view, just being able to pray helps, whether your prayer changes the world outside you or not.

Beyond putting us in touch with other people, prayer puts us in touch with God. I am not sure prayer puts us in touch with God the way many people think it does- that we approach God as a beggar asking for favors, or as a customer presenting Him with a shopping list and asking what it will cost. Prayer is not primarily a matter of asking God to change things. If we can come to understand what prayer can and should be, and rid ourselves of some unrealistic expectations, we will be better able to call on prayer, and on God, when we need them most.

How does the man suffering from inoperable cancer, or the woman with Parkinson's disease, find the strength and sense of purpose to get up and face each new day, when there is no prospect of a happy ending?

I believe that God is the answer for these people. I don't believe that God chooses who should suffer from muscular dystrophy. The God I believe in does not send us the problem; He gives us the strength to cope with the problem.

Where do you get the strength to go on, when you have used up all of your own strength? Where do you turn for patience when you have run out of patience, when you have been more patient for more years than anyone should be asked to be, and the end is nowhere in sight? I believe that God gives us strength and patience and hope, renewing our spiritual resources when they run dry. How else do sick people manage to find more strength and more good humor over the course of prolonged illness than any one person could possibly have, unless God was constantly replenishing their souls? How else do widows find the courage to pick up the pieces of their lives and go out to face the world alone, but on the day of their husbands funeral, they did not have that courage? How else do the parents of a child suffering with brain damage wake up every morning and turn again to their responsibilities, unless they are able to lean on God when they grow weak?

We don't have to beg or bribe God to give us strength or hope or patience. We need only turn to Him, admit that we can't do this on our own, and understand that bravely bearing up under long-term illness is one of the most human, and one of the most godly, things we can ever do. One of the things that constantly reassures me that God is real, and not just an idea that religious leaders made up, is the fact that people who pray for strength, hope, and courage so often find resources of strength, hope, and courage that they did not have before they prayed.

I also believe that sick children should pray. They should pray for the strength to bear what they have to bear. They should pray that sickness and its treatment not hurt them too much. They should pray as a way of talking out their fears without the embarrassment of having to say them out loud, and as a reassurance that they are not alone. God is close to them even late at night in the hospital when their parents have gone home and all the doctors have left. God is still with them even when they are so sick that their families no longer come to visit. The fear of pain and the fear of abandonment are perhaps the most troubling aspects of a child’s illness, and prayer should be used to ease those fears. Sick children can even pray for a miracle to restore them to good health, as long as they do not feel that God is judging them to decide whether or not they deserve a miracle. They should pray because the alternative would be giving up all hope and marking time until the end comes.

The conventional explanation, that God sends us the burden because He knows we are strong enough to handle it, has it all wrong. Fate, not God, sends us the problem. When we try to deal with it, we find out that we are not strong. We are weak; we get tired, we get angry, overwhelmed. We begin to wonder how we will ever make it through all the years. But when we reached the limits of our own strength and courage, something unexpected happens. We find reinforcement coming from a source outside of ourselves. And in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God is on our side, we manage to go on.

It was in this way that I answered the young widow who challenged me about the efficacy of prayer. Her husband had died of cancer, and she told me that while he was terminally ill, she prayed for his recovery. Her parents, her in-laws, and her neighbors all prayed. A neighbor invoked the prayer circle of her church, and a Catholic neighbor sought the intercession of Saint Jude, patron saint of hopeless causes. Every variety, language, and idiom of prayer was mustered on his behalf, and none of them worked. He died right on schedule, leaving her and her young children bereft of a husband and father. After all that, she said to me, how can anyone be expected to take prayer seriously?

Is it really true, I asked her, that your prayers were not answered? Your husband died; there was no miraculous cure for his illness. But what did happen? Your friends and relatives prayed; Jews, Catholics, and Protestants prayed. At a time when you felt so desperately alone, you found out that you were not alone at all. You found out how many other people were hurting for you and with you, and that is no small thing. They were trying to tell you that this was not happening to you because you were a bad person. It was just a rotten, unfair thing that no one could help. They were trying to tell you that your husband's life meant a lot to them, and not only to you and your children, and that whatever happened to him, you would not be totally alone. That is what their prayers were saying, and I suspect that it made a difference.

And what about *your* prayers? I asked her. Were they left unanswered? You faced a situation that could easily have broken your spirit, a situation that could have left you a bitter, withdrawn woman, jealous of the intact families around you, incapable of responding to the promise of being alive. Somehow that did not happen. Somehow you found the strength not to let yourself be broken. You found the resiliency to go on living and caring about things. Like Jacob in the Bible, like every one of us at one time or another, you faced a scary situation, prayed for help, and found out that you were a lot stronger, and a lot better able to handle it, than you ever would have thought you were. In your desperation, you opened your heart in prayer, and what happened? You didn't get a miracle to avert a tragedy. But you discovered people around you, and God beside you, and strength within you to help you survive the tragedy. I offer that as an example of a prayer being answered.

**Chapter 8**

**What Good, Then, Is Religion?**

In a sense, I had been writing this book for fifteen years. From the day I heard the word “progeria” and was told what it meant, I knew that I would one day have to face Aaron’s declining and dying. And I knew that, after he died, I would feel the need to write a book, sharing with others the story of how we managed to go on believing in God and in the world after we had been hurt.

A book telling people how much I hurt would not do anyone any good. This had to be a book that would affirm life. It would have to say that no one ever promised us a life free from pain and disappointment. The most anyone promised us was that we would not be alone in our pain, and that we would be able to draw upon a source outside ourselves for the strength and courage we would need to survive life’s strategies and life's unfairness.

I'm a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron’s life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all of those gains in a second if I could have my son back. If I could choose, I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experiences, and be what I was fifteen years ago, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose.

I believe in God. But I do not believe the same things about Him that I did years ago, when I was growing up or when I was a theological student. I recognize His limitations. He is limited in what He can do by the laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom. I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason.

God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people, and some are simply an inevitable consequence of our being human and being mortal, living in a world of inflexible natural laws. The painful things that happen to us are not punishments for our misbehavior, nor are they in any way part of some grand design on God's part. Because the tragedy is not God's will, we will need not feel hurt or betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. We can turn to Him for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are.

Let me suggest that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen to us. They do not happen for any good reason which would cause us to accept them willingly. But we can give them a meaning. We can redeem these tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them. The question we should be asking is not, “Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?” This is really an unanswerable, pointless question. A better question would be “Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?”

Martin Gray, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Holocaust, writes about his life in a book called *For Those I Loved*. He tells how, after the Holocaust, he rebuilt his life, became successful, married, and raised a family. Life seemed good after the horrors of the concentration camp. Then one day, his wife and children were killed when a forest fire ravaged their home in the south of France. Gray was distraught, pushed almost to the breaking point by this added tragedy. People urged him to demand an inquiry into what caused the fire, but instead he chose to put his resources into a movement to protect nature from future fires. He explained that an inquiry, an investigation, would focus only on the past, on issues of pain and sorrow and blame. He wanted to focus on the future. An inquiry would set him against other people- “Was someone negligent? Whose fault was it?”- and being against other people, setting out to find a villain, accusing other people of being responsible for your misery, only makes a lonely person lonelier. Life, he concluded, has to be lived for something, not just against something.

We too need to get over the questions that focus on the past and on the pain- “Why did this happen to me?”- and ask instead the question which opens doors to the future: “Now that this has happened, what shall I do about it?”

Dorothee Soelle, the German theologian asks whose side God was on in the concentration camps, the murderers side or the victims’ side. Soelle, in her book *Suffering*, suggest that “the most important question we can ask about suffering is whom it serves. Does our suffering serve God or the devil, the cause of becoming alive or being morally paralyzed?” Not “Where does the tragedy come from?” but “Where does it lead?” is the issue on which Soelle would have us focus. In this context she speaks of “the devils martyrs.” What does she mean by that phrase? We are familiar with the idea that various religions honor the memories of martyrs for God, but who died in such a way as to bear witness to their faith. By remembering their faith in the face of death, our own faith is strengthened. Such people are God's martyrs.

But the forces of despair and disbelief have their martyrs too, people whose death weakens other people's faith in God and in His world. If the death of an elderly woman in Auschwitz or a child in a hospital ward leaves us doubting God and less able to affirm the world’s goodness, then that woman and that child become “the devils martyrs,” witnesses *against* God, against the meaningfulness of a moral life, rather than witnesses in favor. But it is not the circumstances of their death that makes them witnesses for or against God. It is *our reaction* to their death.

We, by our responses, give suffering either a positive or a negative meaning. Illnesses, accidents, human tragedies kill people. But they do not necessarily kill life or faith. If the death and suffering of someone we love makes us bitter, jealous, against all religion, and incapable of happiness, *we* turn the person who died into one of the “devils’ martyrs.” If suffering and death in someone close to us bring us to explore the limits of our capacity for strength and love and cheerfulness, if it leads us to discover sources of consolation we never knew before, then *we* make the person into a witness for the affirmation of life rather than its rejection.

This means, Soelle suggests, that there is one thing we can still do for those we loved and lost. We could not keep them alive. Perhaps we could not even significantly lessen their pain. But the one crucial thing we can do for them after their death is to let them be witnesses for God and for life, rather than, by our despair and loss of faith, making them “the devils martyrs.” The dead depend on us for their redemption and their immortality.

God has created a world in which many more good things than bad things happen. We find life's disasters upsetting not only because they are painful but because they are exceptional. Most people wake up on most days feeling good. Most illnesses are curable. Most airplanes take off and land safely. Most of the time, when we send our children out to play, they come home safely. The accident, the robbery, the inoperable tumor are life shattering exceptions, but they are very rare exceptions. When you have been hurt by life, it may be hard to keep that in mind. When we are stunned by some tragedy, we can only see and feel the tragedy. Only with time and distance can we see the tragedy in the context of a whole life and a whole world.

How does God make a difference in our lives if He neither kills nor cures? God inspires people to help other people who have been hurt by life, and by helping them, they protect them from the danger of feeling alone, abandoned, or judged. God makes some people want to become doctors and nurses, to spend days and nights of self-sacrificing concern with an intensity for which no money can compensate, in the effort to sustain life and alleviate pain. God moves people to want to be medical researchers, to focus their intelligence and energy on the causes and possible cures for some of life's tragedies. Throughout human history, there have been plagues and epidemics that wiped out whole cities. People felt that they had to have six or eight children so that some at least would survive to adulthood. Human intelligence has come to understand more about the natural laws concerning sanitation, germs, immunization, antibiotics, and has succeeded in eliminating many of those scourges.

God, who neither causes nor prevents tragedies, helps by inspiring people to help. God shows His opposition to cancer and birth defects, not by eliminating them or making them happen only to bad people, but by summoning forth friends and neighbors to ease the burden and to fill the emptiness.

To the person who asks, “What good is God? Who needs religion, if these things happen to good people and bad people alike?” I would say that God may not prevent the calamity, but He gives us the strength and the perseverance to overcome it. Where else do we get these qualities which we did not have before? The heart attack which slows down a forty-six-year old businessman does not come from God, but the determination to change his lifestyle, to stop smoking, to care less about expanding his business and care more about spending time with his family, because his eyes have been opened to what is truly important to him- those things come from God. God does not stand for heart attacks; those are nature's responses to the body’s being overstressed. But God does stand for self-discipline and for being part of a family.

The flood that devastates a town is not an “act of God.” But the efforts people make to save lives, risking their own lives for a person who might be a total stranger to them, and the determination to rebuild their community after the floodwaters have receded, do qualify as acts of God.

When a person is dying of cancer, I do not hold God responsible for the cancer or for the pain he feels. They have other causes. But I have seen God give such people the strength to take each day as it comes, to be grateful for a day full of sunshine or one in which they are relatively free of pain.

When people who were never particularly strong become strong in the face of adversity, when people who tended to think only of themselves become unselfish and heroic in an emergency, I have to ask myself where they got these qualities which they would freely admit they did not have before. My answer is that this is one of the ways in which God helps us when we suffer beyond the limits of our own strength.

Religion alone can affirm the afflicted person's sense of self-worth. Science can describe what has happened to a person; only religion can call it a tragedy. Only the voice of religion, when it frees itself from the need to defend and justify God for all that happens, can say to the afflicted person, “You are a good person, and you deserve better. Let me come and sit with you so that you will know that you are not alone.”

None of us can avoid the problem of why bad things happen to good people. Sooner or later, each of us finds himself playing one of the roles in the story of Job, whether as victim of tragedy, as a member of the family, or as a friend-comforter. The questions never change; the search for a satisfying answer continues.

We do not love God because He is perfect. We do not love Him because he protects us from all harm and keeps evil things from happening to us. We do not love Him because we are afraid of Him, or because He will hurt us if we turn our backs on Him. We love Him because He is God, because He is the author of all the beauty and the order around us, the source of our strength and the hope and courage within us, and of other people’s strength and hope and courage with which we are helped in our time of need. We love Him because He is the best part of ourselves and of our world. That is what it means to love. Love is not the admiration of perfection, but the acceptance of an imperfect person with all his imperfections, because loving and accepting him makes us better and stronger.

Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people? That depends on what we mean by “answer.” If we mean “Is there an explanation which will make sense of it all?”- “Why is there cancer in the world? Why did my father get cancer? Why did the plane crash? Why did my child die?- then there is probably no satisfying answer. We can offer learned explanations, but in the end, when we have covered all the squares on the game board and are feeling very proud of our cleverness, the pain and the anguish and the sense of unfairness will still be there.

But the word “answer” can mean “response” as well as “explanation,” and in that sense, there may well be a satisfying answer to the tragedies in our lives. The response would be to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to the people around us, and to go on living despite it all.

In the final analysis, the question of why bad things happen to good people translates itself into some very different questions, no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it has happened.

Are you capable of forgiving and accepting in love a world which has disappointed you by not being perfect, a world in which there is so much unfairness and cruelty, disease and crime, earthquake and accident? Can you forgive its imperfections and love it because it is capable of containing great beauty and goodness, and because it is the only world we have?

Are you capable of forgiving and loving the people around you, even if they have hurt you and let you down by not being perfect? Can you forgive them and love them, because there aren't any perfect people around, and because the penalty for not being able to love imperfect people is condemning oneself to loneliness?

Are you capable of forgiving and loving God even when you have found out that He is not perfect, even when he has let you down and disappointed you by permitting bad luck and sickness and cruelty in His world, and permitting some of those things to happen to you? Can you learn to love and forgive Him despite His limitations, as Job does, and as you once learn to forgive and love your parents even though they were not as wise, as strong, or as perfect as you needed them to be?

And if you can do these things, will you be able to recognize that the ability to forgive and the ability to love are the weapons God has given us to enable us to live fully, bravely, and meaningfully in this less-than-perfect world?

*I think of Aaron and all that his life taught me, and I realize how much I have lost and how much I have gained. Yesterday seems less painful, and I am not afraid of tomorrow.*