

Why Do Bad Things Happen? by Holly C. W. Aastuen
Job 1:1; 2:1-10 October 4, 2009

Rev. Bob Davis, pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Miami announced one summer Sunday that at the age of 52 he was leaving the ministry. He had Alzheimer's disease and though he still looked every bit the former football player that he was, he was no longer able to do the things his job required.

Here's what he said:

"As a Christian I belong completely to Christ. My life is not mine, but Christ's. Today my ministry draws to a close and I can say with Paul, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now I stand at the finish line in victory, because God set the distance I was to run...and I am finished at fifty-two!"

He continued: "Pray for Betty, my wife, as I turn guardianship over to her. I will not suffer nearly as much as she will. Pray that I in no way inadvertently disgrace our Lord, this church, or the people I love. Finally, when I get to that stage where my mind is gone, pray that the Lord will take me quickly. The glory of being with Christ makes me gasp with joy."¹

'The glory of being with Christ makes me gasp with joy'—imagine having the depth of faith to be able to say that. Imagine seeing death as a doorway to joy, a thing to look forward to.

This week's news has reminded us once again, of how suddenly disaster can come. The tsunami, earthquake and after shocks in the South Pacific have killed thousands of people with thousands more still trapped, thousands of homes damaged, tens of thousands of lives irrevocably changed. We never know when disaster might hit. We never know when we might have our chance to meet God.

Today's Bible story is of a man of faith who was one of the wisest and richest men who had ever lived. He was a good man. He walked with God, was blameless and upright, and did everything to avoid evil.

Job had seven sons and three daughters. He was enormously wealthy, He had seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels and five hundred oxen and five hundred donkeys and many, many servants.

Job was also a righteous man. When his children would throw a party Job would follow up after the party with an offering to God for any sin that may have been committed during the party. I mean, this man was really doing everything right.

One day as Satan and God were talking God points out God's pride and joy—Job—a man who loves God, is upright and does everything to avoid evil.

Satan responds, "The only reason Job is so good is that you protect him from all disasters. If you didn't protect him from such disasters, he wouldn't be so obedient to you. If you take all his protection away from him, he will curse you."

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God is so sure that even in adversity that Job will be loyal and loving to God, that God agrees to let Satan send evil Job's way.

The next day everything comes crashing down on Job. All his livestock are killed by attack from enemy forces or by natural disasters. All ten of his children are killed in the midst of one of their parties when a sudden storm shatters the house and kills all of them.

The story is then picked up with this morning's scripture reading where God and Satan again converse and Satan is not convinced of the goodness of Job since Job himself hasn't been afflicted.

And so God allows Satan to inflict disease upon Job as long as Satan promises to spare Job's life.

Our reading ends as Job is afflicted with sores all over his body, he's sitting on a pile of ashes, scratching his loathsome sores with a piece of broken pottery. Yet in all of his suffering, Job refuses to curse God or blame God for all the evil that has befallen him. His relationship with God remains.

Back in the early 5th century, St. Augustine proposed that there are at least two kinds of love. One kind of love (which is pronounced Uti in Latin and means 'to use') is love of use. For example, you may love money not particularly because you like the way it looks or feels, but because it can be used to get something you want. The other kind of love (which is the Latin word Frui and means to enjoy or derive pleasure) is a love for something not because of what it can do for us, but just because we love it. Certain people we love just because they are who they are, not because they are a means to an end.

The question is, with which kind of love do we love God? Do we love God because of what God can do for us, because our love for God might lead to a better job or a better life or greater success, or do we love God just because God is God and we would do anything for God?

Do we communicate with God through prayer in order to foster a loving relationship with God, or do we come to God in prayer primarily when we are in need?

The kind of love Job has for God is the sort of love that does not have conditions. He loves God simply for who God is. His love for and regard for God at its core never changes, even when his life takes a turn for the worse.

When I was young and things weren't going my way, I would let my parents know in no uncertain terms that they were treating me unfairly. They were doing

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something egregious like giving my older siblings a higher allowance or letting them stay up later at night. It just wasn't fair. And I told my parents so.

And then they would say to me, "Well, life isn't fair. No one said you would be treated the same as your older brother and sister."

Life isn't fair. Life isn't fair when you're 6; life isn't fair when you're 60. As much as we wish life were fair, it isn't. People we love are dying and people we pray for still get ill.

Maybe the question is not why do bad things happen to me, but what have I learned about God from my experiences of life? Authentic faith doesn't ultimately let us down. Authentic faith encourages us to pray for enough of God's grace to help us through the most difficult experiences of life.ⁱⁱ

Philip Yancey, author of many publications including *Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference?* and *What's So Amazing about Grace?* shares a story of a friend of his named Martha, a 26 year old successful business woman, struck down by Lou Gehrig's disease, which affects the nerves. Gradually she lost control of her arms, then her legs, then her breathing. In a matter of months, she was so disabled that she was hospitalized.

One of her last wishes was to return to her apartment in Chicago and spend a couple of weeks, perhaps her last two weeks, in that apartment inviting over friends and relatives to say one last good-bye.

The problem was that Martha couldn't do anything at all for herself—she couldn't even sleep unsupervised because if she fell asleep in the wrong position she might suffocate.

She couldn't afford to hire three shifts of nurses, but she found a Christian community called the Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston Illinois. There are sixteen women there who all agreed to take care of her for the two weeks. They got baby sitters for their own children. They cooked, they cleaned her and her apartment, they were constantly with her, caring for her.

They also talked to her about God and about her future. She wanted to turn to God, but she didn't want to do it out of a fear of dying. She wanted to do it out of love.

In the love and care of those 16 women, she saw the love of God. And through their ministry she turned her life over to God. She was baptized for the first time in her life and before she died she shared with the women of Reba Place what they had meant to her.

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Why do bad things happen to those we love? We may never know, but we do know that countless people are able to gain meaning and insight into God as they go through suffering. Though gaining meaning and insight isn't the primary focus of any such suffering, those who have gone through it are better able to see the presence of God in everything they do.

In the coming weeks we are going to examine some of the crucial questions of faith. This is the first in a series of sermons studying some of the toughest questions people have asked. Together we'll be talking about such issues as: Why do bad things happen? Where is God in the midst of all this? And How Do I Live Faithfully?

And as we journey through these questions of faith, we remember the faithful witness of a man who knowing he was going to die said, *The glory of being with Christ makes me gasp with joy.*

Gasping with joy may not be our first response to the experience of pain, the experience of disaster, but I pray that joy may be the place we arrive when all is said and done.

Bad things happen. In the midst of bad things, as the late William Sloane Coffin said in the eulogy for his son Alex, "God offers us minimum protection and maximum support."

Suffering is a part of our human condition. May we find not only that we can endure suffering, but that in it we find that our relationship to God carries us through.

As it says in Paul's letter to the Romans: For suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

ⁱ Sermon by Rev. Robert W. Bohl, "What Has Religion Done for You?" April 20, 1997.

ⁱⁱ Ibid..