

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Presented by Graham Agnew

Introduction

In my work, as a minister, this question comes up all the time: Why do bad things happen to good people?

And tucked away in the Psalms there's a little verse that really encapsulates what many of us think and feel when faced with this difficult question. It's Psalm 22 and the writer is really up against it - facing all kinds of problems. At one point (verse 8) somebody asks: "If the Lord likes you, why doesn't he help you?" Has that question ever crossed your mind?

Bob Hope, the famous American comedian, offered the following remark when being presented with a certain award: "I don't deserve this ... then again, I have arthritis and I don't deserve that either!"

That's a natural response in the face of suffering - I don't deserve this; why is this happening to me?

The reality is, good people ... people of honesty and integrity ... people of faith and belief DON'T deserve the bad things that happen to them. But we've got to quickly move beyond the stage of wondering and puzzling and trying to figure out why, because the fact is: Bad things DO happen to good people and in most instances there doesn't seem to be any plausible explanation.

The really great news however is that there are three affirmations that Christians can make which will get us through even the toughest times.

The first of the three affirmations I want us to consider is: **LIFE'S UNFAIR, BUT GOD IS GOOD.**

Now, of course, there are some very unhealthy variations of this particular statement. For example: Life is good, but God's unfair. Just when I'm enjoying life, He steps in to teach me a lesson in humility or dependence or whatever.

Then there's: Life's unfair and God's unfair! The person who says this generally sees themselves as a victim of circumstance and believes that everything in life is weighted against them.

In John's Gospel, Chapter 9, we read of an encounter between Jesus, His disciples and a blind man. The disciples pose an interesting question: "Who or what caused this man to be born blind?"

Jesus' reply provides us with a very strong clue as to the causes of suffering:

"His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parent's sins. He is blind so that God's power might be seen at work in him."

I believe this to be a clear reference to the fact that God doesn't necessarily cause bad things to happen - sometimes it's just the luck of the draw or because of the actions of bad people or as a result of the fact that this world is in a fallen state. Disease, accidents and problems are realities - they do happen to both good and bad people.

The point is that no matter how serious or tragic the problem, God can be honoured and the person involved strengthened as a result of their faith in Him.

In 1981 a Jewish Rabbi by the name of Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It's a very powerful book and in one section he writes:

“I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents and natural disasters because I realise 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 ...”

Back in the 60's there was a bumper sticker that read: “My God is not dead, sorry about yours”. Kushner says his bumper sticker would read: “My God is not cruel, sorry about yours”.

Let's be honest, in the face of the stark reality of suffering, sometimes life is unfair - but the overwhelming evidence of Biblical theology and the experience of humankind through the centuries bears witness to the fact that GOD IS GOOD ... GOD IS MERCY ... GOD IS JUSTICE.

Listen to the Psalmist in Psalm 103 v. 8-10.

“The Lord is merciful and loving, slow to become angry and full of constant love. He does not keep on rebuking, He is not angry forever, He does not punish us as we deserve or repay us according to our sins and wrongs.

That's the kind of God I can respond to in my time of suffering.

There's a second affirmation we can make, by faith, when bad things happen to good people - and it's this: **DISAPPOINTMENT IS INEVITABLE BUT DEFEAT IS OPTIONAL.**

In the face of tragedy, pain and suffering there is inevitably a lot of grief and sadness. Sometimes (mistakenly I believe) Christians say: “I must be strong ... I mustn't get emotional ... I must put on a brave face.”

We forget that when told of the death of his friend Lazarus, Jesus wept - He was overcome by grief and deep disappointment. His humanity really kicked in at that point, proving beyond any shadow of a doubt that when bad things happen, disappointment and even despair are inevitable.

However this second faith affirmation introduces an aspect to the mystery of suffering that is so important - and it's CHOICE. The fact is, we can't always choose our circumstances in life, but we can choose how we react to those circumstances.

This is beautifully illustrated by the story of two small boys - they were twins who experienced a terrible upbringing: involving an alcoholic father (who was a petty thief) and an abusive mother. As a family they lived in squalor and were exposed to the really dark side of life.

One of the boys grew up to be a criminal, constantly in trouble with the law - he never broke free from his unfortunate past.

The other boy became a doctor and despite his difficult background and huge problems he studied hard and was determined to do something worthwhile with his life. When questioned about why they had chosen their particular pathways, these twin boys both gave identical answers:

“Well, with a background like mine, what would you expect?”-

Now I realise you mightn't want to push this analogy too far as there are many factors that influence our upbringing, but the story makes the point that the ability to choose our reaction to the circumstances of life is one of the greatest gifts that God has given us. The apostle Paul certainly knew about this when he said in the book of Philippians (Ch.4 v.12 & 13): “I have learned this secret ... I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me.”)

Paul's ability to make positive choices in adverse circumstances could be attributed to the strength and power that he received from his faith in Jesus Christ.

Over the years of my ministry I have met stacks of people who have made the same discovery as Paul. Faced with incredibly difficult circumstances and overwhelming odds they, in God's strength, are able to make this all important affirmation: Disappointment is inevitable but defeat is optional. To my mind, they are among the most inspirational people alive.

I'm suggesting this morning that in answer to the question "Why do bad things happen to good people", there are three very strong affirmations that Christians can make:

Life's unfair but God is good

- **Disappointment is inevitable but defeat is optional** - and finally:
To merely exist is natural: to have hope and faith is supernatural.

Many people find themselves merely existing - no spark, no life, no sense of purpose at all! And to a certain extent we may be able to understand and almost excuse their actions in hopping off life's treadmill. "It's natural," we might say, "They've suffered so much!"

But when you see people who are up against it, doing it tough, experiencing lots of bad things - but managing to summon hope and faith, meaning and purpose, you have to say,

"Wow! **THAT'S SUPERNATURAL!**"

The celebrated author C.S. Lewis once posed the question: "Why do the righteous suffer?" His answer: "Why not? They're the only ones who can take it."

In other words, it's the people of God who have the inner resources to cope. Someone has said: "Those who know the path to God can find it, even in the dark." I'll repeat that: "Those who know the path to God can find it, even in the dark."

I mix and move all the time with people who have found and continue to find that pathway in times of darkness.

Another of my favourite quotes from Paul is 2 Cor. 4:9 where he says: "... although badly hurt at times, I am not destroyed".

And Paul knew what suffering was about: illness, shipwreck, imprisonment, betrayal ... he'd seen it all. To give up would have been natural ... but to press on, as he did without losing his hope, faith, meaning and purpose ... that was Supernatural!

Conclusion

We started off today by asking the question "Why do bad things happen to good people" and we have acknowledged that this side of heaven there are really no answers. But it's not as though we are left without hope because through faith in Jesus Christ we can make certain affirmations and these will enable us to prevail in the midst of our suffering.

Those affirmations are:

Life's unfair but God is good.

Disappointment is inevitable but defeat is optional

To merely exist is natural, to have hope and faith is super-natural.

I'm aware that these faith affirmations can still leave us feeling frustrated as we look for a meaning to our suffering. I mean, most of us could bear almost any pain or disappointment if we thought there was a reason behind it.

The reality is that the bad things that happen to us do not necessarily have a meaning when they actually take place. They do not necessarily happen for any good reason that would cause us to accept them willingly.

But through faith in Jesus we can give them meaning; we can redeem tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them.

So the question is not: What did I do to deserve this? It's really: Now that this has happened, what am I going to do about it?

It was Victor Frankl, the famous Austrian psychiatrist who survived the Nazi concentration camps who said: "If you have a **why** to live for, you can bear almost any **how**."