

SINCE IT'S A-LOVING-GOD-MADE WORLD.
WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO ANYBODY?

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Right away you can see that I'm not including atheists in my address this time: they've got other problems, and worse, but they haven't this problem (which theologians call the "theodic" one). My disquisition is for biblical creationists (please, not "scientific creationists") who believe that love is both the *fons et origo*, the fountain & beginning of "all things," the universe, and also the human *sine qua non*, the irreducible necessity, good, & goal (to use an old liturgical phrase) "for us men and our salvation." We so believe, but in the teeth of contra-evidence in our own lives, the lives of other human beings now living, & what we have come to know of human life in former days. This contra-evidence is so strong that (1) honesty compels us to continuous examination in the openminded pingpong of faith/doubt, in spite of the assurances of the heart & our heritage, and (2) eagerness for truth directs us to wrestle against what seem to us false or specious supports of the Faith.... Here are at least the main RESPONSES to this Thinksheet's question:

1. "I don't know." Emma, 2½, often pulls that response when I, Grandpa, point to something--usu. in a book--and say, "Emma, what's THAT?" Sometimes she makes a game of it: I can tell both by her intonation & by her bodylanguage that she DOES know! When I then say "Emma! You do TOO know!" she giggles & tells me what it is. Other times her intonation says "I'd really like to know." And sometimes, when she's had enough, is tired or feeling lazy, "I don't care." But when she knows, & is proud & happy she knows, in full voice she announces what it is--eg, "BUTTERFLY!"....This the agnostic response is sometimes (a) careless ("Yes, I believe in God, but why should I bother my head about things I can't understand, esp. theology?"), sometimes (b) meditative ("The question sometimes bothers me, I can't answer it, but I know I should & do trust in God beyond what I can understand."). A more intellectual form of (b) is this: "Life is a mix of meaning & mystery, & this question is in the latter category. I'm not obscurantist, but neither am I scientistic: I'm not defending my faith by cover-up, but I consider naive & deleterious the assumption that 'mystery' is only what we humans have not yet gotten around to penetrating with reason."

2. Because some people deserve to have bad things happen to them, & you can't run a railroad or a universe without negative feedback. Our loving Creator wants these bad things to happen to these people. It's a moral universe, & God is moral (good, not evil) as well as loving. In fact, God is loving in being moral.

3. Because some greater good is divinely intended in the cases of bad things happening when undeserved. This greater good is an implicate of, & logical inference from, God's love: love as love steadily intends the greater good. So what's the greater good?

(a) God let's bad things happen to good people to check out their sincerity, their integrity, their motives. How could God judge us rightly without checking us out (Job 1:1-12)? (Is the God/Satan dialog at the beginning of Job an instance of primitive, poetic, or profound anthropopathism? Your choice; "profound-poetic," say I.) Is Job pious, or only prudent? The depths of piety are uncalculating, moved by ultimate sanctions: while intelligent religion does not rule out sanctions of consequence, these prudential sanctions are secondary....Note the contrast between Job's case, which is passive (bad things happening), and that of Abraham's aqedah, the God-aborted offering up of Isaac, which was God having asked somebody to do a bad thing actively to himself.

(b) God let's bad things happen to good people to teach them some things they could not otherwise learn. "Otherwise": love would

not let unnecessary bad things happen, happen unnecessarily, to the undeserving. Even in the case of Jesus (Heb.5:8): "even though he was God's Son, he learned through his suffering to be obedient." Love causes, or at least permits, bad things to happen to good people for the otherwise unavailable learnings & growings.

(c) And now the big toughie: God let's bad things happen to good people to benefit other people. Under this late-Jewish & Christian doctrine, love is seen as unable otherwise to confer these benefits & simultaneously able to confer on the vicar (thus, "vicarious suffering") feedback blessings otherwise unavailable. Martyr Jesus (the doctrine of the "atonement") here stands between the Maccabean martyrs & the early Christian martyrs as, for Christians, the supreme instance of this response to this Thinksheet's question. The next one (#2217) has a poem of mine--humorous-devotional--revealing my appreciation of & participation in this teaching of the Church....Again both passive (without the vicar's choosing) & active (as in Jesus &, in Christian literature, Christ figures--eg, Sidney Carton at the end of Dickens' A TALE OF TWO CITIES; &, in history, the Roman Catholic priest who, at Auschwitz, took the armband off a Jew & died for him). Note the separability of vicarage as a FACT of human experience from the THEORETICAL-theological question Would a truly loving God build vicarage into the life processes? To the question, we Christians make two replies: (1) God didn't preach it & not practice it: God incarnate died "for us men & our salvation"; (2) The teachings on the atonement are not philosophical propositions but word-pictures, metaphors from the common life & thus poetic truths, to be exegeted not logically but devotionally--for building saints, not systems....A recent monograph sees the Gospel of Luke as intending not only the death of Jesus as a righteous sufferer, but also the death of Jerusalem, to be understood vicariously, at least as benefiting the world through reflection on God's justice-judgment. Chas. Homer Giblin, SJ; THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM ACC. TO L.'S GOSPEL: A HISTORICAL-TYPOLOGICAL MORAL (ANALECTA BIBLICA, vol.107, x-123pp, 1985).

4. I know, & here's how it all is. This "theory" (Greek word for "view," "viewpoint") comes in two packages:

(a) The scholastic: Jewish, Catholic, Protestant versions. Respective examples: Job's friends, Aquinas, & American fundamentalists. Put it all together &, somehow, it spells theistic reason.

(b) The deistic. This creaky old view, whose main support was Enlightenment mechanism, has gotten dusted off & represented, in print & the electronic media, by a brilliant preacher-teacher, Rabbi Harold Kushner. Like scholasticism's theistic reason, this deistic reason has the power of high rhetorical plausibility: it "makes sense" to folks who believe in "common sense" & want to be rid of mystery, ambiguity, & tentativeness even though these three are qualities of human life itself, not just of biblical faith. K. strips the Book of Job of these three qualities, bringing them under the control of reason (as do, variously, Jung & Archibald MacLeish--respectively, ANSWER TO JOB and J.B.). The only allowable (by K.) theological thought when a bad thing happens to you as a good (!) person is this: God is love but has created (shades of pagan Stoicism!) "the laws of nature" to be ex opera operanda (working by themselves).

The canonical text of Job, which includes epilog as well as prolog, preaches both the greater good eventuating from undeserved suffering (as do we Christians, centrally in the resurrection from the death of Jesus our Lord), and God's freedom from the rational nets in which humans try to capture, and thus limit, the divine. "Job" does not perplex & irritate me as much as do his rationalist^creducers.