

1. WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?

The theme of this sermon series is the power of hope. Hope is one of the trio of most powerful virtues in the Christian life – faith, hope and love. Often, hope is not understood, but hope is the parent of both faith and love. And yet when bad things happen in someone’s life, hope can be lost.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Life will throw us some things that will disappoint us and cause pain, and unless we know how to handle it, hope will be killed. Consider the following story.

At twenty, Lynn Pengelly was young and beautiful, but she was dying. Lynn had a dream to be a nurse, to help sick people get better. She had been eager to commence her training, but a year later a routine X-ray cruelly revealed a growth on her lung.

The doctors did their best, but could not contain the cancer. “Your daughter has only a few months to live,” they told her father and mother. Her parents decided the best place for Lynn was with them, so they brought her home.

Lynn accepted her fate and did not complain. Her courage and calm as death approached amazed the frequent visitors who came to see her. But as the weeks dragged on, the pain became unbearable. Every breath was a struggle. Finally she asked her father, “Daddy, why doesn’t Jesus come for me?” He studied her beautiful face. No father should have to answer such a question. “He will come when he is ready, sweetheart”, he replied.

A few hours later, Lynn died. But hers was no lone journey from earth to heaven. She must have seen Him, for her face reflected His splendour and shone with a serenity that not even death could erase. Those who came into the room where she lay were deeply moved when they saw it. Her passing was no ugly finality.

That evening her distraught mother turned to the Bible for comfort. It had been her practice each night to read it to Lynn, but now she read alone. The scheduled passage for that day was from the love song of Solomon. The words, clearly meant for Lynn, filled her with wonder as she took them in:

*“Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,
And come with me.
See! The winter is past:
The rains are over and gone.
Flowers appear on the earth;
The season of singing has come* Song of Solomon 2:10a-12b

This is a true story. Lynn was my late wife Jane’s sister. A couple of years after Lynn died, Lynn and Jane’s father passed away in his 50’s with a heart attack and soon after that event Jane was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Jane’s family had an avalanche of what you would consider to be bad things. You will have your own stories and you will know of others who have been through similar things. If you have not had anything like that ever happen to you then please cheer up – it will happen at some point, you will not be left out!

So why do bad things happen to good people? We can easily explain bad things happening to bad people because they seem to deserve it – that’s justice. We can even tolerate good things happening to bad people because that’s the mercy of God. But, bad things happening to good people take a bit more figuring out.

If we don’t figure it out we will head for bitterness sooner or later or disappointment that will create a barrier between us and God.

So what are some of the answers? I don’t have all the answers, by the way, because for some things there are no answers. I think that in the church we have tried so hard to figure God out and so preached formulae that the mystery, wonder, and awe of God have left us.

Sometimes there is a mystery you just have to live with. There may not be an answer this side of eternity, but in eternity there will be. However, there are a few reasons we can discuss now.

1. **We live in a fallen world** – this world is not the way God made it. There is a curse that has come into the world and it is out of order, but Jesus is bringing everything back into order and one day He will present it all to His Father and it will be perfected.

2. **People have free will**, which God will not violate. That means people will decide to do bad things to you and you will suffer the consequences of their decisions. Sometimes God steps in to protect you and sometimes He chooses not to.
3. **Satan is alive and active**. Jesus called him a murderer, a thief and a liar. He kills, steals and deceives and sooner or later we will get caught up in this battle. We must combat that with spiritual warfare.
4. **God's purposes** are the fourth reason and the focus of this teaching.

“We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and who are called according to His purpose for them. For God knew his people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son.” Romans 8:28

That's easy to believe when something good has happened to you, like you just got a tax return. But, you try to believe that when life is miserable, you don't have answers for problems, relationships are falling apart, or you are struggling in your marriage. Or you've been raped or abused. That's a lot harder to believe. And Satan will come and accuse God just like he did in the Garden of Eden – when God looks bad sin looks good and many people stumble at that point of hardship and abandon their faith in God because they can't figure out why a good God would allow that to happen.

The number one question asked by most non-Christians is why bad things happen to good people, but they will usually phrase it like this - **“If God is a loving God why is there so much suffering in the world?”** You and I need to have answers for them as well as ourselves. When God looks bad, sin looks good and Satan will convince us to doubt God's goodness and love. Right there he undermines the foundation of our faith.

NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS GOD IS A GOOD GOD

I believe that the goodness of God is learned more in the hard times than in the good times.

*Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I obey your word.*

You are good, and what you do is good;

It was good for me to be afflicted

so that I might learn your decrees.

Psalm 119:67-68a, 71

I believe in miracles and in the supernatural. Just about every church that my wife Greta and I go to we make a point of praying for the sick, despite us both losing our spouses to sickness some years ago. And we see many healed. However, not every time you lay hands on someone will you see them healed. Healing is perfectly available but imperfectly ministered and often imperfectly received. I have hope that the success rate will increase.

I learned that “*You are good and what you do is good*” the hard way in 1986. I found a lump growing on my body and it was diagnosed as Hodgkin’s disease, a type of lymphatic cancer. So, I went through nine months of chemotherapy and had much prayer and came out the end healed and have been free ever since. I really thank God for that. But, it was a dark year and that was the year Jane went into a wheelchair for the first time. People would come up and say, “*If you just had enough faith you wouldn’t need chemotherapy and Jane would get out of her wheelchair*”. I’d say, “*Thank you very much*” but would angrily think how could they say that? I have to be real. It was really dark and I asked, “*Why God?*” Then I read the verses in Psalm 119. God sowed something in my heart in that year: although Jane and I were passing through a very dark time we discovered that God is a good God.

“You are good and what you do is good.”

Circumstances can’t alter that, because that’s the truth about God. Whatever is happening to you today you have to believe that God is good and what He does is good.

J. R. Tolkein, the Christian author of Lord of the Rings, was had a non-believing friend called C S Lewis whom he led to the Lord. Lewis himself went on to write a number of books and he was a confirmed bachelor for many years. Then one day he met an American lady and fell in love and they got engaged. Everyone noticed the difference; he was a happy man looking forward to marriage. Then she contracted an incurable illness, and after some time passed away. He was devastated by the loss, but learned through it. Later he wrote -

“God whispers in our pleasures and shouts in our pain.”

One of the good things God will do when bad things are happening to you is that He will want to speak to you and He will want you to hear His voice like at no other time.

There is something called the fellowship of His sufferings and when we go through a hard time Jesus wants us to get close to with Him. Yet many walk away from that opportunity of intimacy, being so focused on their own suffering that they fail to see His heartbeat and they fail to see what He is saying to them.

Someone said that, *“Every situation of pain is an invitation into the heart of Jesus.”* Whatever you are suffering He suffered more, whatever rejection you’ve faced He faced ultimate rejection from God His Father because He became sin. Whatever hurt, whatever violence is being done to you, whatever disappointment has happened - He suffered it. Whatever betrayal in relationships He suffered it more – one of His own betrayed Him. Jesus has been there. He suffered. He knows. He’s been there. He’ll walk with you. He’ll share secrets with you that you wouldn’t learn any other way. You’ll discover things about Him you just don’t discover in the good times.

Many want to know Him and the power of his resurrection, but are not so sure about the ‘fellowship of His sufferings’ part! What does this mean? How do we fellowship with Him in His sufferings? I supposed it meant we would know His closeness when we suffer, and He would comfort and empathise with us. This is true, but only half the story. Some years ago, when Jane was still alive, I became aware of what the fullness of this may mean. For weeks I had been overcome with the

sense of loss MS had caused. I remembered our wedding day and grieved that Jane could no longer walk, or hold my hand as we strolled on the beach, or minister with me. I had prayed for healing many times but this day, in my pain, blurted out, “*Lord, I want my bride back!*” What happened next shook me.

Jesus spoke. Into my mind came words that were so clear, they seemed audible. He sighed, “*I know what you feel – I want my bride back too!*” Discerning the ache in His heart, I understood that Jesus graciously loves His church as she is, but wants us free from the disability of sin and powerlessness. Then we would be able to radiate Him to a world that has lost its way, a world He deeply cares about. I knew an intimacy with Him in our mutual pain that I had not experienced before. He understood my distress and in some small way I understood His. This was fellowship in His sufferings.

TAKE THE LONG VIEW

How do you cope with pain and suffering? How do you keep going? How do you forgive? You’ve got to take the long view; if you take the short view you’ll try to balance everything in this life. But, the ledger of good and bad won’t balance always in this life, but in eternity it will balance because of the glory that is coming.

“All honour to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for it is by his boundless mercy that God has given us the privilege of being born again. Now we live with a wonderful expectation because Jesus Christ rose again from the dead. For God has reserved a priceless inheritance for his children. It is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And God, in his mighty power, will protect you until you receive this salvation, because you are trusting him. It will be revealed on the last day for all to see. So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while.

These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold--and your faith is

far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honour on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.”

1 Peter 1:3-7

Don't you love the Bible's 'for a while' – “*endure trials for a while*” – a while is a lifetime! Jesus said, “*In this life you will have much trouble, be of good cheer I have overcome the world.*” Jesus gives us an overcoming spirit. You overcome in the midst of trials. You can see miracles in the midst of trials or you can endure it and go through and come out the other side and not be bitter but be better. You can be a person refined by the Lord; there is wonderful joy ahead though it is necessary to endure trials for a while.

These trials are only to test your faith to show it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. If your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honour on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. That's when God balances the books. Whatever you and I have been through, whatever Satan sent to destroy you, whatever others did to violate you, whatever our own foolish actions caused to come on our heads, whatever a fallen world dished up to us – if we declare in the midst of those things, “*God, My Father, I don't understand, but You are good and what You do is good and my trust is in You.*” then that will be glory for you when Jesus comes again.

God's ultimate purposes are greater than our present comfort. His goodness doesn't guarantee our immediate comfort and in our pain we must trust Him.

Dr. Larry Crabb has said: “*Feeling better has become more important than finding God. Finding God means to face all life, both good and bad, with a spirit of trust ... you know you are finding God when you believe that God is good no matter what happens.*”

Finding God means to face all of life, both good and bad with a spirit of trust. You know you are finding God when you believe God is good no matter what happens. I once asked my wife Jane what she had learned all the years she had been in a wheelchair. She stunned me with her answer; she said, *"I've learned to smile."* In the midst of her suffering, she had discovered God's goodness. She had learned to maintain hope because he is good and what he does is good. Now she is smiling in heaven. God brought Greta into my life and on our wedding day, as she walked down the aisle, I smiled as I heard God say, *"I have given you your bride back."* Not quite how I expected it to happen, but nevertheless a restoration. He is truly a good God!

No matter what happens to us in life, this has to be our catch cry:

"You are good and what you do is good."