

If God is so good why are things so bad?

The problem of suffering from Job to Jesus

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1 *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

Job 1-2

IT WAS JUST OVER 70 YEARS AGO THAT AUSCHWITZ concentration camp was liberated by the Soviet Army in 1945. One of those discovered half starved to death was a fifteen year old Hungarian Jew named Elie Wiesel. He, his mother and sister were separated at the camp, and would not see each other again. He wrote: 'Never shall I forget that night, the first night of the camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke, never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever ... Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Some talked of God, of his mysterious ways, of the sins of the Jewish people, and of their future deliverance. But I ceased to pray. How I sympathised

with Job! I did not deny God's existence, but I doubted his absolute justice.¹

Given what he saw in Auschwitz such a doubt is perfectly understandable, and some would say, wholly justifiable:

The other gas chambers were full of the adults and therefore the children were not gassed, but just burned alive. There were several thousand of them. When one of the SS sort of had pity upon the children, he would take the child and beat the head against a stone before putting it on the pile of fire and wood, so the child lost consciousness. However, the regular way they did it was by just throwing the children onto the pile. They would put a sheet of wood there, then sprinkle the whole thing with petrol, then wood again, and petrol and wood, and petrol—then they placed the children there. Then the whole thing would be ignited.²

The cry behind the cry

Behind the cry 'Where is God?' is the deeper cry of Wiesel, 'Where is God's justice? Why doesn't he do something? Surely if he is all powerful he can, and if he is all good he will, so why the delay?' Some would argue that this is the price we have to pay for having what is called 'free will.' We can choose to do good or evil and innocents invariably get caught up as collateral damage when evil is chosen. Others would maintain

that if that is so then the price for such 'free will' is way too high—for example, six million Jews disappearing in the gas chambers and sixty million lives perishing in World War Two.³

But what of situations which don't involve the action of other human beings but 'creation gone wrong,' as was the case with another Jewish believer, Rabbi Harold Kushner? His son, Aaron, had been diagnosed with a rapid ageing disease, becoming like an old man of eighty. Kushner writes: '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, what grounds did Aaron have to suffer?'⁴

Perhaps even more candid in his questioning is Philip Yancey, 'If God is truly in charge, somehow connected to all the world's suffering, why is he so capricious, unfair? Is he the cosmic sadist who delights in watching us squirm?'⁵

Senseless suffering

Perhaps of all the books in the Bible associated with the question of senseless suffering, what philosophers call 'the surd,' the book of Job is the most well-known and yet least understood. It is a book which doesn't deal primarily with the 'why' question of the origins of evil