

HOW CAN A

GOOD GOD

LET BAD THINGS

HAPPEN?

MARK TABB

NAVPRESS 



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Above all, all praise to the God of all comfort “who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. You can be sure that the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ” (2 Corinthians 1:4-5).

# INTRODUCTION

It has been said that every great book begins with a question. I am not claiming greatness for this book, but it, too, began with a question. Actually, it began with a series of questions spread out over many years. And those questions always came back to one central theme: suffering. However, the question I found myself asking regarding suffering through the years was not the great philosophical dilemma with which great men and women have wrestled for millennia. I don't know why, but I have never asked why there is suffering in the world or why God would allow suffering. Perhaps some long-forgotten childhood experience left my mind too warped to ask such an obvious question. No, the question I found myself coming back to time and again was always less philosophical and more rhetorical. The question that launched me on the journey that resulted in this book was simply: Why not suffering? Or, more to the point, why should I or anyone else be exempt from the suffering that has enveloped the human race since the first man and woman rejected God in favor of sin?

I know, I know. Let the howls of protest begin. I sound as though I am minimizing the pain and horror that has marked the history of the human race since the dawn of time. Believe me, that is not my intention. I am writing this preface nearly five years after I first wrote

the book you are about to read. Since its original release, many people have come to me and shared their own stories of suffering. At times, I can hardly stand to listen, not because my heart is hard but because it breaks for those on whom life has thrown such a horrific burden. As if that were not enough, God has recently focused my attention upon stories from the Holocaust. After reading Elie Wiesel's classic work *Night*, I almost contacted my publishing company to cancel this book. Wiesel's true story haunts me, and it will haunt me until the day I die, as well it should. Reading how he and his family suffered unspeakable cruelties at the hands of other human beings, I realized how little I or anyone I know understands about suffering. Yet human history has shown that the atrocities of the Holocaust are not unique, neither in the past nor in the future. That thought chills me to the bone. How could I or any thinking human being minimize the horror of suffering?

Nor am I saying that suffering is part of the human experience, so deal with it. Such a fatalistic approach is an unnatural thought in the minds of creatures created in the image of God. Perhaps this is why suffering creates such a dilemma for members of the human race. Since time began—or, more accurately, since sin entered the world—death and suffering have been part and parcel of the human experience. Romans 5:12 tells how Adam's sin brought death to the entire human race. Not only does this explain why everyone dies, it also tells us why the stench and power of death is wrapped around the entire world. Yet even though everyone dies and even though suffering has defined human existence since the day Adam and Eve brought death down on all their descendants, death and pain and agony always feel like invaders when they strike us or someone we love. We recoil against them and scream out in anger. Our reaction shows that all of us know we weren't made for this. We were not made for a world filled with heartache and sorrow, yet we've never known

any other world. That is why we wonder how a good God could allow bad things to happen. When bad things strike, our hearts long for a world free of such needless and mindless suffering. And the questions begin pouring from our hearts toward heaven. *How, God?* we ask. *How could you let this happen?*

And that's the question I plan to explore in the pages that follow. I want to explore the question of how, not why. How could God let bad things happen? is not a question of indictment against God but a question of wonder. What I really want to know is this: How did we get in this place where suffering is such a natural and normal part of life yet feels so unnatural and abnormal? But that's only a small part of the equation. The bigger question that lies behind it is this: Can I continue to trust a God who claims to be good if he will not exempt me from the pain and suffering of this cruel world? And if I can muster up a yes to that question, I still face a litany of others. I will not list them all here. They await you on the pages that follow. They are not questions I made up. Rather, they are questions I've heard in hospital waiting rooms and at accident scenes and in intensive care wards over the past twenty-plus years during my work first as a pastor and now as a fire department chaplain.

Yet this book is not merely a book of questions. It is, above all, a book written not for those who want to consider the question of suffering on a philosophical level but for those who face it on a daily basis. I wrote this book for my friends who lost their seventeen-year-old daughter more than a decade ago and to this day continue to feel the void her death left behind. I wrote this book for the wife and mother whose husband abandoned her because he did not want to be pinned down by the responsibilities of being a husband and father. I wrote this book for the friend whose wife suddenly died after more than thirty years of marriage, leaving him lost and disoriented without her. And I wrote this book for the little boy who cries in the dark

as his parents fight violently in the other room, thinking he is asleep. Simply put, I wrote this for the person who hurts, as one pilgrim to another, as we try to figure out how to trust the God we know is good as we make our way through a world that is anything but.

There is another question that finally pushed me over the edge and made me start writing this book. It came directly from the pages of the Bible, from the lips of the man who will forever stand as the poster child of suffering. His name was Job and his story can be found in the Old Testament book that bears his name. I will not give away too much of his story here, for I want you to read the rest of this book. However, he asked a question I have not been able to push out of my mind since the day God brought it to my attention through one of my former Bible professors, a godly man named Ken Matthews. Job asked his wife this simple yet profound question. On the day the two of them lost everything, he turned to her and asked, “Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?” (Job 2:10). You will hear this question reverberate through every page of this book. The question so gripped me that I knew I must use Job and his story as my guide if I were to ever write anything worth reading on a subject as weighty as this. I pray that you will find this book worth reading and that God will use it to grant you grace and healing through the pain you endure—the pain that prompted you to pick up this book and consider how a good God could allow bad things to happen to you.

# WE CANNOT CONTROL GOD'S HAND

“As powerful as we are, we have no control over God’s hand.” That’s all the sheriff could say to explain why Stan and Beth and two of their three children died in a freak accident. Given the circumstances, what else could he say? The odds against a ten-ton, one-hundred-year-old tree suddenly uprooting itself at the precise moment a family of five drives by in their Lincoln are astronomical. And for the tree to strike neither the hood nor the trunk but to land squarely on top of the passenger compartment crushing four of the five people inside defies imagination, especially when the car was traveling forty miles an hour.

As I sit in the quiet of my study, typing out these words two weeks later, my mind still struggles to believe that Stan is gone. I keep expecting a chime to sound on my computer, and I’ll click the envelope on the corner of the screen to find some lame joke from him in my e-mail inbox. Half the time I found these quips and quotes a little annoying. I don’t like forwards. At least, I didn’t.

I guess when I go out next week with the surviving members of our group of friends who eat lunch together on a regular basis in order

to encourage each other, it will sink in that Stan is gone, because he won't be there. He was always the steady member of the group. The highs and lows of life didn't knock him off balance. Perhaps raising an autistic son kept things in perspective for him. He and Beth worried about the day they would not be there for their son. But that day will never come. They died together because they could not control God's hand.

The question of why they died reverberated through the funeral home last week. Why would God take the life of a pastor and his wife and their ten-year-old son and six-year-old daughter? And why would he leave a four-year-old girl to grow up with nothing but fading memories of her family? I am thankful no one offered any answers. Four caskets lined up across the front of a room made any answer seem insignificant and thoughtless.

The pastor in charge of the funeral compared the deaths of Stan and his family to the tragedy the Old Testament character Job endured. In one day, Job lost everything. Raiding bands of thieves rode in from the desert, carried away all his oxen and donkeys and camels, and killed his servants. Later that day, fire fell from heaven and burned up his flocks and his shepherds. At the same time, a windstorm knocked down his oldest son's house, killing everyone inside, including Job's seven sons and three daughters. As the pastor recounted the story, he added, "Sometimes bad things happen to good people and we never know why. God doesn't offer any explanations. All we can do is continue to trust in God and his goodness and grace."

I looked across the room at the only surviving member of the family and thought, *But Job wasn't four and a half. Job wasn't four and a half.*

Emily is. Emily cried in the dark, pinned in the backseat of the car, unable to move because of the tree. Sounds of rescue workers scrambling to do something surrounded her while one firefighter held

her hand and reassured her that everything would be okay. Two days later she was released from the hospital. She keeps asking where her mother and father are. "With Jesus in heaven," she is told. She doesn't understand why she can't be with them, nor does she understand why she cannot go back to the only home she ever knew. Emily's world will never be the same because she has no control over God's hand.

At this point many of us feel compelled to defend God's honor. God didn't cause the tree to fall on Stan and Beth any more than he caused calamity to fall upon Job, we say in God's defense. If anyone is responsible, it has to be Satan. One of my friends told me the Devil had to be pushing hard on that tree to make it fall as Stan and Beth drove by. I guess that makes sense. Stan was doing good work in his church on the east side of Indianapolis, and Satan wanted it stopped.

But Stan's church was small. Why would Satan target him? Will trees soon drop on everyone who tries to make a real difference in the world for Jesus' sake? A renowned pastor in Dallas passed away at the age of ninety-two a few days after Stan died. He never had to dodge any trees. Why didn't Satan take his life years ago if he is indeed in the business of snuffing out the lives of anyone who poses a threat to his kingdom of darkness?

Even if Satan is to blame for Stan's death, something still troubles me. According to the first two chapters of the book of Job, Satan asked for and received God's permission before he could unleash his nightmare on Job. I can't help but ask, is the one who gives permission as culpable as the one who carries out the deed? Insurance companies seem to think they are. They classify such events as trees dropping on cars as "acts of God." So did Job. "The LORD gave me everything I had, and the LORD has taken it away," he cried out as he fell to the ground after hearing that his ten children died together in a tragic accident. "Praise the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

I know I'm treading on dangerous ground here. I've already had people object to what you just read and tell me that God didn't cause these tragedies. I agree. He didn't. But in his providence, God did allow them to occur to accomplish his greater purposes. I grew up hearing a lot about the difference between God's permissive will and his causal will. This distinction makes tragedy more palatable while keeping our image of a good God intact. A holy God will not, and cannot, do something evil.

But what if accidental deaths are not evil in the eyes of God? What if total financial ruin is not tragic in his estimation? What if all of the calamities we dread—the nightmare scenarios and worst-case outcomes that keep us up at night worrying—are not worst case but best case to God? If somehow, and God forbid it to be true, that which I fear is the very thing God not only allows but causes, do I really want to follow a God like this?

I can, I am told, because God has a purpose in all trials. Those who find themselves immersed in trials and suffering hear this a lot. The Lord has a reason for everything that happens to those who love him and call upon his name, we're told. To paraphrase Albert Einstein, God isn't playing dice with the universe or with his children. All things work together for his ultimate plan. Good will result from evil. It did for Joseph.

I love the story of Joseph, especially as images of that crushed Lincoln flash in my mind. Joseph was his father's favorite son. Although he was the second-youngest of twelve brothers, he was the first son born to his father Jacob by Jacob's one true love, Rachel. She later died giving birth to Joseph's brother Benjamin. Grief made Jacob even more protective of his favorite son, but no one could protect Joseph from his brothers' jealousy. One day when they were all far from home taking care of the family herds, the ten older brothers seized Joseph, threw him into a hole, and sold him as a slave to the

first caravan that happened by. His misfortune did not stop there. As if being a slave wasn't bad enough, Joseph was unjustly accused of rape and thrown into an Egyptian prison to rot away, forgotten.

But God didn't leave him there. A few years after Joseph landed in prison, God caused a chain of events that resulted in Joseph winning his freedom, and then the king of Egypt made him his number-two man. When a drought brought the ten brothers back before Joseph, he told them not to worry for their lives, even though he had the authority to pay them back for what they'd done to him. Instead he told them, "Don't be afraid of me. As far as I am concerned, God turned into good what you meant for evil" (Genesis 50:19-20).

"God turned into good what you meant for evil." Surely the same principle applies to the tragedies the rest of us endure. No matter how evil circumstances may appear on the outside, God can and will turn them into something good. Romans 8:28 turns the principle into a promise: "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." If not for this promise, we could do nothing more than shiver under the covers, afraid of whatever calamity will strike next.

I think I'll keep repeating Romans 8:28 over and over in my head until I feel better, until I can drive down a deserted country road and not wonder if a tree will strike my car, killing four of my five family members. But the more I repeat the verse, the more I am struck by what it does not say. It does not say God has some hidden purpose behind every event that happens in my life, at least not a purpose I will ever see or understand. Nor does the verse tell me I can force something good out of this. I cannot control God's hand, and when I try to force some good purpose onto tragic events, that's exactly what I'm trying to do. God may work for the good of those who have been called according to his purpose, but that doesn't mean you or I will

fully understand what that good may be.

And that's the dilemma I really do not want to face. I can accept tragedy when I see God working through it, but will I when I cannot? Job posed this question to his wife: "Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" He didn't ask how a good God could do such a horrible thing to him. Instead he accepted both his earlier good fortune and the tragic turn his life eventually took as expressions of God's will for his life. I don't know if I can. As I sit here pecking at my keyboard, I wonder if I will ever be able to bring myself to accept bad things from the hand of God without demanding an explanation. Will I stick with him in the midst of a nightmare if I never see any tangible results or ever know why he would allow such pain to be inflicted upon me? Looking at suffering and pain through Job's eyes makes me realize that the question is not whether I will try to understand tragedy or rejoice in it in the hope that spiritual maturity runs through the valley of the shadow. The real question is one I would rather not ask: Will I accept bad things from the hand of God as readily as I accept the good?

Can I take the question a step further? I daily ask for God's guidance. I want his favor and his mercy and his grace and his presence. I'm not alone. All of us want God to bless us and cause his face to shine on us. But at what price? In my years of trying to follow Christ by faith, I've discovered that I feel closest to Jesus when life is the hardest. Am I willing to ask him for hard times because in those times I must exercise real faith? I want his presence, but am I willing to ask for feelings of distance from God in order that I might walk by faith and not emotion? Am I willing to pray, *God, allow tragedy into my life, allow me to suffer, in order that I might understand what your Son went through on the cross?*

Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll save those questions for the last chapter of this book. For now it is enough to ask, will I

continue to believe in him and follow his Son even if doing so never results in any blessings in this life? Will I believe when believing only makes life harder not easier? Will I accept bad things from the hand of God and keep trusting in him even if the bad so overwhelms the good as to make it invisible?

Do I want to explore such questions? Are you kidding? Believe me, this is one aspect of the Christian life I would rather leave untouched. All of us would. Unfortunately, we can't ignore it because it doesn't ignore us. We don't seek tragedy and heartache and tears and asking God why. They seek us. It is not a question of *if* our lives will be turned over by grief but *when*. And when tragedy strikes, when everything around us screams, "God has forgotten you," what will you do?

"Shall we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" Job asked his wife. We cannot control God, but will we follow him when his hand strikes rather than caresses?