

“WHERE IS GOD WHEN... (#5):
HOW GOD REALLY WORKS IN OUR WORLD”

(Job 38:1-7; 42:1-6, 10)

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[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) Series Intro Video; (#2) “Evan Almighty” Video Clip]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 2-8-09]

-I-

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read NRSV Text: Job 38:1-7; 42:1-6, 10 and Pray.
[Contemporary Service ONLY:] Lay Speaker Read MSG Text: Job 38:1-7; 42:1-6, 10 and Pray.
2. [WATCH SERIES VIDEO INTRO (Time: 0:20) – end on this week’s sermon background slide]
3. For the last five weeks, we’ve been sharing in a series primarily aimed at helping us make sense (from a Christian perspective) out of the tragedy, suffering, and evil in our world.

A–But a secondary, implicit goal has been to help each of us develop an adequate “*Doctrine of Providence*” – a theological phrase that refers to how one believes God interacts with the world – so that when bad things *do* happen, we’ll already have some spiritual and emotional “tools” to better help us cope with them. ¹

B–And that’s why in today’s focus we’re pulling together what we’ve talked about thus far in order to better understand “*How God Really Works In Our World.*”

4. Now, throughout this series you may have picked up on the fact that there are actually numerous ways to approach/answer this question. ²

A–So what I’d like to do first is lay out at least *three* of the most popular explanations, share why I think they’re inadequate, and then offer a more biblical fourth approach for today.

B–HOW does God really work in our world? and WHY does He allow tragedy, suffering, and evil to exist? (Refer to Bulletin Sermon Notes)

-II-

5. Well, the first explanation is that bad things happen because “*There IS No God.*”

A–Obviously this is the “**ATHEIST**” answer, and it’s very popular today – after all, “*If there was a God, & He was good and loving and powerful, then He wouldn’t allow bad things to happen. Therefore, God must not exist*” – or so the logic goes. ³

B–And yet, not only does this response sort of arrogantly presume that there’s no other reasonable explanation, but if you follow it to its conclusion, you’re left with a sterilized, antiseptic perspective on life that leaves one empty and hollow inside.

1–I don't know about you, but I've never met nor read the writings of an atheist who seemed truly content or fulfilled in life.

2–Instead, this point of view seems more often to leave a person with a hardened, pessimistic, bitter (often angry) attitude towards life and people –...

3–...which is an existence I don't find particularly compelling, especially given that there ARE reasonable alternatives.

6. So, a second explanation people sometimes give is that bad things happen not because there's NO God, but instead because "*There IS a God, but that He either CANNOT or WILL NOT intervene.*"⁴

A–This has been called the "DEIST" answer, and for those of you who've forgotten your history, the 17th-century "Deists" believed that God was like a giant watchmaker—creating the world and winding it up, but then stepping back and leaving it to run on its own.

B–And since in this view God is *uninvolved* in anything that happens after initial creation, then when bad things "just happen," not only can God *not intervene*, but He can't help humanity *cope*, either.⁵

C–But my question for Deism is two-fold:

1–First, the witness of the Bible squarely contradicts the notion of a God who's totally uninvolved with creation, & instead portrays a God who is continually interacting in our world – *not* always to prevent tragedy or cure disease (although sometimes), but *always* to give His presence and His hope.⁶

2–But scripture aside: Does it make sense to say that a God who's powerful enough to *create* the universe would *discard* the power to *intervene* in it at times? I don't think so, and so I find Deism inadequate even from the view point of pure logic.

7. So, a third explanation that's very popular among some branches of Christianity is that "*There IS a God who CONTROLS & CAUSES everything – meaning that bad things are somehow a mysterious part of God's divine will*" and we just need to accept them as such.

A–Now, I and others have called this the "HYPER-CALVINIST" answer, and I find a lot of Christians buying into it today without ever questioning it.

1–You may know that John Calvin was a great reformer of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation who stressed (appropriately so) the biblical notion of the *sovereignty* of God –and many churches trace their theology back to him, including most Baptist, Presbyterian, and many non-denominational churches.

2–But *HYPER*-Calvinism takes Calvin's beliefs to an extreme... to the point where *everything* that happens (good or bad) happens because God *willed* it to happen.

3–So for example, when a hurricane strikes, or someone is murdered, or a husband beats his wife, this view says that we should just accept it as “God’s will,” & know that God allowed it as part of His “greater plan and purpose” for our lives.

B–Now, *I do* know that some people find comfort in thinking that their suffering is somehow part of a “divine plan.” But the problem I have with this is again two-fold:

1–First, it implies that God somehow *needs* OUR suffering in order to fulfill HIS divine purpose for the world – & that’s simply *not* what we find in the scriptures.⁷

2–But second, if absolutely *everything* that happens is really part of some “divine master plan,” then humans begin to look more like puppets on a string,⁸ instead of the free moral agents the Bible describes⁹ – creatures who have *free will*, and can *choose* right from wrong.

C–Well, the scriptures tell us that we’re not puppets, so I don’t buy the “hyper-Calvinist” explanation about why bad things happen – it’s just *not* part of “God’s will.”

–III–

8. So if these first three explanations are inadequate, then what are left with? Why do bad things happen? And how does God *really* work in our world?

A–Well, let’s watch a short clip from the movie “Evan Almighty” that hints at a very biblical answer:... [WATCH VIDEO CLIP: 1:00:12-1:02:02; Time: 1:50]

1–Think about it? If God *does* exist & interact in our world (as we believe He does), then does He *usually* do so in extraordinary, supernatural ways?...*OR* (as the movie implies) does He *more often* do so by using US and our free will as human beings?¹⁰

2–And if so, then doesn’t that mean that bad things happen not so much because God *causes* or fails to *prevent* them, but because *we humans* allow and create them?¹¹

B–And what’s more is that if the real *cause* of most of the world’s sufferings are human beings using their free will in a manner *contrary* to God’s ways, then doesn’t it also mean that the *answer* to the world’s sufferings are humans using that same free will in a manner *consistent with* God’s ways?¹²

1–I think so, and I think that’s why God gives us each other, & gives us the Church—to support and care for us through times of tragedy and suffering (as many here can testify), and to model for the world how we’re to love each other.¹³

2–Perhaps you’ve heard that rather than the question “*Why do bad things happen to good people?*” people of faith instead learn to ask, “*What can good people do when bad things happen?*”¹⁴

3–Isn't that the story from several weeks ago with the so-called "Miracle on the Hudson" (the airliner that landed in the river)? ...People prayed, and God answered their prayers with a pilot, crew, and rescue workers that got everyone to safety.

C–You see friends, God works in our world *primarily* through *people* – through His flawed, imperfect, human children – to bring about healing and caring and goodness in our world.

D–And when *we* don't attend to that task as the church and as God's children, then *we* (not God) are the real ones to blame for most of the tragedy, suffering, evil in our world. ¹⁵

–IV–

9. That's exactly what the Old Testament character Job found out in today's scripture (*you thought I'd forgotten, didn't you?*). No, it summarizes today's point – remember the story?...

A–Job had lost everything, and throughout his book we find people trying to convince him of the same explanations we hear today: that God wasn't there; or didn't care; or had actually *caused* his suffering as punishment for his sins.

B–And like us, for a while Job bought into some of these, leading God to question him in the first part of today's reading (Chapter 36): "*If you're so smart, Job, then tell me where you were when I made the universe? How was it done, Job? ...you seem to know so much! Come on... get off the sideline and let's have it out!*"

C–But by the time we get to Chapter 42, we find Job admitting that all his (and his friends') assumptions about God had been wrong – he finally understands that God isn't the *cause* of bad things, but that God *does* do the 4 things we've already learned in this series: ...

#1–He is *with* us in the *midst* of our suffering,...

#2–He can *redeem* and *bring hope* out of them,...

#3–He helps us live the way of love *through* them,...

#4–And He usually uses *other people* to bring all this to pass. ¹⁶

10. So you see, while the Bible teaches that God *does* have a plan and a purpose for our world, it also teaches that God usually depends on you and me to accomplish it.

A–Oh, He doesn't *need us* in order to bring it to pass, but He nevertheless *wants us* to help Him accomplish it.

B–And so, the real question for us today is: In the midst of life's tragedy, suffering, and evil, will *WE choose* to be part of it? ...because when we do, we not only *see* God's light at the end of the "tunnel," but we actually *become* God's light to somebody else in there with us!

11. [PRAY]

12. [HYMN: #130, "God Will Take Care of You"]

ENDNOTES:

1. Now, you might say, “*But preacher, I don’t really care about learning ‘theology.’*” And yet, “theology” is merely a description of our *beliefs in action* – meaning that ALL of us are really “theologians,” where we realize it or not. So the question becomes: Are you going to wait until a tragedy or some bad thing strikes in your life *before* you try to figure out where God is and how He works? OR... Wouldn’t it be better for your “theological reflections” *ahead of time* to give you the spiritual and emotional tools that’ll help you make it through? In fact, the question is not *if* but *when* we go through suffering – ALL of us will experience, and when we do is not the time to be trying to figure out what we believe or think about God and suffering. Instead, having an adequate “doctrine of providence” *ahead of time* (e.g., before we go through the tragedy or suffering) can actually help us better cope when we actually *face* it. *That*, in fact, is precisely what this series has been about.

2. An excellent summary of what we’ve learned thus far in this series is found in the following statement by a Pastor of Congregational Care at one of United Methodism’s largest and fastest growing churches (The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection near Kansas City, MO): “*Suffering and tragedy is not God’s desire for us, but it does occur in the process of life. Suffering and tragedy is not given to teach us something but through it we may learn. It’s not given to teach others something but through it they may learn. It’s not given to punish us but sometimes it is the consequences of our sin or bad judgement. Suffering is not given, and tragedy does not come to us because our faith is weak, but through it our faith may be strengthened. God does not depend on human suffering to achieve His purposes, but sometimes through suffering His purposes are achieved. Suffering can either destroy us or it can add meaning to our lives.*” [Rev. Ray Firestone, shared by Rev. Adam Hamilton (www.cor.org) in his sermon “*The Gospel In the Face of Grief*” in the series Questions for God In the Face of Tragedy (May 3, 1998)].

3. This is one of the arguments set for by the atheist author Richard Dawkins in his popular book The God Delusion (Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

4. This is the conclusion of Rabbi Harold Kushner in his best-selling book When Bad Things Happen to Good People. It is an overall good book, and contains some good points, but in this I disagree with his fundamental conclusion: that God exists, cares for and loves His created order, but is not powerful enough to prevent bad things from happening. The flip side of Kushner’s argument (that God is not powerful enough) is that God IS powerful enough but *doesn’t care* about the plight of tragedy and suffering in the world. I find this pessimist argument equally unconvincing, for it seems to drastically contradict the evidence and witness we have in the Bible, where God is overwhelmingly portrayed as good, loving, kind, and compassionate, and who does care.

5. You may remember many of America’s founders were Deists, including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and even George Washington. In this view, since God is on the outside of the universe “looking in/down” on us, it means that there are no such things as miracles, no belief in intercessory prayer, and even no belief in God’s incarnation in Jesus (Jesus was a good, moral man, but not God’s son). These views are directly inconsistent with the testimony of the scriptures.

6. These are illustrated through the many stories of God working through His people Israel in the Old Testament, and through His Church in the New Testament, but more especially through His sending of his own son Jesus – Jesus is the ultimate in divine interaction/intervention in our world.

7. It’s true that as Christians we need to be able to say that we’ll do whatever is necessary to glorify God, so that God’s will can be accomplished even through our suffering and/or death. However, I somehow read the Bible as saying that our suffering and death is an *ordinary* part of God’s divine purpose. True, God can *fold* such things *into* His purpose, but I don’t think He *desires* them. I think this can even be said of Jesus’ death – God did not *will* His son’s suffering and death, but *used* it to redeem humanity. Only looking back on it today *after the fact* do we refer to Jesus’ passion and death as “*God’s PLAN for humanity.*”

8. Who, despite the *illusion* of freedom, have no *real* say over their lives.

9. Read Genesis 1-3, where the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a symbol of free will – of the fact that humans are created as free moral agents, with the freedom to *choose* right from wrong, good from bad, the ways of God from the ways of evil.

10. We find this emphasized over and over again in the scriptures: In Genesis 1:26-38, we find that God created the world, but He then put humans *in charge*, expecting US to take care of most of what happens. And further in the Bible, we find God using people like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the prophets to carry out His will. In fact, He used Abraham to raise up an entire people – the people of Israel – to be a light of God’s purpose and plan and love to the other nations of the world (Read Isaiah 42:6 & 49:6). Then in the New Testament, we read that God came to us as a person – Jesus to enact God’s will and show us the way back to God. And when Jesus went back to be with His Father, scripture tells us that he left his Church (made up of His *people*) as his agent to continue to carry out his work and purpose in this world. The point: God primarily works in our world *through people*.

11. The idea here is that most tragedy, suffering and evil in our world is caused by humans who exercise their free will as human beings in way that is contrary to God’s ways. We choose to destroy instead of create, to take life instead of giving it, to take what we don’t have instead of sharing what we do. Thus, when we allow others to exercise their free will in a manner contrary to God’s ways, the result will always be bad things happening. I’ve heard it said that “*What we call God’s ‘No’ is often merely another person failing to say ‘Yes’ to being God’s answer to our prayer.*”

12. Too often people today see bad things happening in our world, and we shake our fist at God and say, “*God you ought to do something about all this!*” And do you know what God says? “*Yes, you’re right. Someone should do something. But since I’ve given you dominion over the earth, why aren’t YOU as my people doing something about it?*” In other words, when people are suffering, it is OUR responsibility to minister to them, care for them, pray for them, and comfort them.

13. One word of caution here: even while we are ministering to persons in the midst of suffering, it is important to allow the ministry to be given for its own sake, rather than to “correct” a recipient’s “faulty” theology. For example, when a person is suffering, it may not always be appropriate to emphasize that God will bring good out of that suffering. Yes, that is the truth. However, in the midst of suffering, it is not always the best time to share that truth. Suffering people instead usually mostly need our love and encouragement, rather than a reminder of sound Biblical theology.

14. Shared with me recently by an East Cobb U.M.C. member.

15. For example, read James 2:14-16. Framing this fourth answer in the form of the previous ones would result in the following explanation: “***There IS a loving and powerful God who can and sometimes does intervene, but who more often chooses to work through ordinary human beings. This means that suffering happen mostly because WE humans either allow bad things to happen, create the circumstances that cause them, or fail to do things to alleviate the suffering caused by the bad things.***”

16. Notice especially the words of Verse 10: “*And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.*” In other words, it wasn’t until Job “*prayed for his friends*” that his situation began to change and look up again. The point here is that when we’re busy doing *for others* and helping to BE the human answer to *their* prayers, quite often we find God using *them* to answer *our* prayers, as well.