

June 4, 2006

The Justice of God and Those Nagging Exceptions to the Rule
 Psalm 73:1-17 / Ecclesiastes 8:7-17 / Job 8:20-9:24

About 9-10 months ago I went on to Yahoo to check my email account, and there was an Ipod advertisement which said this:

"Life is random. Give chance a chance."

And though I know what they meant by it, I thought it did express what many unbelievers feel when they watch the news and consider some of the events that take place in this world on a regular basis:

A suicide bomber walks into a mall in Israel, and 30 people die in the explosion. Not any specific military targets. Not some group of people who has committed some terrible crime. Just regular people—mothers and fathers; grandparents and children. People, as they say, who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Violence that seems just plain arbitrary. Random violence that seems to have no rhyme nor reason to it at all. "It just plain happened."

And you know what? Even as a believer I have to admit that on occasion I myself have wrestled with the fact that when such things happen, "It all seems so random."

And because it does, I can understand completely how an unbelieving person, looking at that situation, would be led to surmise that life is very random, or that what happens, and who it happens to, often seems very arbitrary—which is why we've coined the phrase "random violence."

The same is true of natural disasters. Like the earthquake in Indonesia this past week, or the Tsunami that hit Southeast Asia without any warning last year, or Hurricane Katrina last year in New Orleans, or my own experience of living through Hurricane Mitch in Honduras.

It led me to ask: Was there any rhyme or reason to why it took the path it took, or who survived as opposed to who perished in it? Were those who died worse people than those who survived?

Or what about the people who just happened to be in the upper floors of the World Trade Center or that particular part of the Pentagon when those planes hit on 9/11?

Were those who died more sinful than those who survived? Didn't believer and unbeliever die side by side in the same catastrophe? Didn't good and bad / sinner and saint alike, perish in the same way?

And therefore, wouldn't anyone looking at those facts at least be tempted to consider that it all seemed so very arbitrary or random—simply another example of “some people being in the wrong place, at the wrong time, while others were lucky enough not to be?”

You see, if you HAVEN'T wrestled with issues like that, or if you are UNWILLING to wrestle with issues like that, you won't like this passage, because in it Job forces such issues upon us! And for good reason: He appears to believe that true faith SHOULD grapple with such things. True faith MUST grapple with such things!

In the past unbelievers have often accused conservative Christians of being like “ostriches” who simply “hide their heads in the sand when something threatens them”—somehow thinking that just because they refuse to look at some threatening thing, it has somehow gone away!

And in all fairness, their criticism is sometimes justified. There are Christians who refuse to consider ANYTHING that challenges their faith—apparently thinking that faith is something SO fragile that it will be dashed to pieces, or evaporate, when challenged by even the slightest opposition.

BUT THAT'S NOT TRUE (at least not of biblical faith)! Biblical faith is like a tree. It gets stronger as it's exposed to the winds and storms. The flexing produced by the wind and resistance makes the fibers of the tree stronger than the tree raised in the protected environment of the greenhouse.

And that's precisely the point of today's text—true faith (or people of true faith) are not afraid to LOOK AT, or CONFRONT HEAD-ON, the nagging difficulties, and seeming contradictions, and unavoidable exceptions to our often neat and tidy belief systems.

Contrary to what unbelievers have often accused us of, people of true faith actually REFUSE to hide their heads in the sand, or PRETEND that life in this world is so totally orderly, and consistent, and fair, that it will ALWAYS fit perfectly into our little theological boxes.

In fact, people of true faith (like Job) are willing to admit that sometimes spirituality is very messy / what God allows in the outworking of His providence is often quite puzzling, and the whole issue of how one attains godliness is a mystery that's hard to fathom.

The problem Job has is that his friends don't seem to think so! They appear to think everything is very simple and explainable. You simply do this and God in turn will do that—almost like doing a business transaction!

They resemble many American Christians who think that godliness can be attained by simply by praying a certain prayer, or praying in a certain way, or following a certain methodology — “3 Easy Steps (or 5, or 9, or 12!) to Whatever You Want Out of Life.”

Christianity made the way modern people like it — quick and easy and painless! Like a book I once had entitled, “The One Minute Christian” — a take-off I’m sure of the secular best-seller entitled — “The One Minute Manager.”

As Mike Mason notes in regard to the faith of Job’s friends, they have turned: “the mystery of godliness” into a “cold, mathematical justice (or formula).” “In some ways,” he says, “philosophy” is really a better term than “theology” for the three friends’ relentlessly logical way of thinking.”

So, in light of all that, what’s the **FIRST** thing we can learn from today’s text? I believe it is this: The essence of what a truly mature faith in God consists of—a faith recognizable because it has these characteristics:

It is not afraid to ask, or grapple with, the difficult issues of life. It is willing to admit there are some things pertaining to the spiritual life that just don’t seem to fit into any nice neat categories at all. It’s a faith that refuses to pretend difficulties don’t exist, and also refuses to pretend that there are no exceptions to the rule. Or to borrow a line from one of my favorite TV shows, it’s a faith that is willing to live with, and even thrive in spite of things that can only be called “Unsolved Mysteries,” or “Irresolvable Paradoxes.”

In verse 2, Job admits that there is a GENERAL SENSE in which what Bildad has said is basically true. But he isn’t willing to embrace Bildad’s beliefs in their entirety, because true as some of it may be, it still leaves too many questions unanswered—like the question Job asks in the second part of verse 2:

“How CAN a mortal be righteous before God?” or again, “How can a person dispute with Him?” (v. 14) “Who can say to Him, ‘What are you doing?’” (v. 12)

You see, Job is not only a man with a lot of questions, but a man who earnestly wants real, tangible, substantial answers to his questions! He's not satisfied with the trite answers he's getting from his friends, which leave too many issues unaddressed.

He doesn't want to be like his friends who are indeed acting like that ostrich—hiding their heads in the sand, and somehow thinking that if they only hold their heads under ground long enough, the threat to their neat and tidy belief system won't be there when they pull their head out and look around!

So Job confronts them with the same type of issue I pressed upon you earlier: How DOES one who holds to Bildad's theology deal with the fact that in a catastrophe (Job uses the term "scourge" like the destruction of a city in war), both blameless and wicked perish together indiscriminately? (v. 22)

"Why is it," Job asks, "that innocent people die side by side with guilty people, thereby mocking the despair of the innocent? (v. 23) And, What about a land controlled by wicked people where the judges do pervert justice, and therefore the innocent don't get the protection they should, and criminals don't get the punishment they deserve? (v. 24)

If God is sovereign (which is Job's whole point in verses 4-20!) how do those things fit into their nice, neat, tidy, mathematical-like system of theology where the righteous are always blessed, and the wicked always cursed?

If God NEVER rejects a blameless man, and NEVER strengthens the hands of evildoers; if the blameless are ALWAYS the happy and joyful ones, and the wicked ALWAYS clothed in shame or destroyed (as Bildad asserts in 8:20-22), how does one explain the righteous dying side by side with the wicked, or the wicked controlling the land so no one truly gets justice?

And again Mike Mason pegs it when he writes:

"In GENERAL terms Bildad is right. However, when this general truth is applied to the particular case of Job—and even more conspicuously, when it is applied to Jesus Christ—Bildad turns out to be profoundly...wrong. For on Calvary it was God's explicit plan to "reject a blameless man" and to "strengthen the hands (of the evildoers)" who crucified Him. And so it is with Job. In Job we see what happens when the Lord places more weight on a man's shoulders than he can gracefully bear, and when He abandons that righteous man to carry that weight by himself. Is this not what a "cross" is? It is abandonment (or at

least the felt experience of abandonment) by God... Obviously there is some place in Bildad's thinking for the stoical acceptance of suffering as a kind of 'penance;' but there is clearly no place for the redemptive bearing of unjust, undeserved suffering."

There is no place for the concept that the righteous often suffer at the hands of, or in a vicarious way, on behalf of, the unrighteous, yet redemptive type of way.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point we can glean from this text. The fact that Job is NOT content to settle for inadequate theological constructs that make no room for exceptions to the rule! Theological constructs that are so methodical, and calculated, and systematized that they leave no room for MYSTERY, GRACE or the SOVEREIGN FREEDOM and DIVINE PEROGATIVE OF GOD!

Confident as his friends are that their belief system is true, Job cannot buy into it, for it allows no room for God to be God, and allows no room for the fact that sometimes the righteous do suffer, and mourn, and lose everything / while the wicked laugh, and are joyful, and prosper (as Psalm 73 painfully admits).

You see, any valid theological system must be able (at least to some degree) to address, or offer an explanation for the major issues we confront in everyday life. And if it can't, or doesn't, one must question its validity.

That's one of the reasons that Christian theologian / evangelist Ravi Zacharias (though raised as a high caste Hindu in India), rejected Hinduism and became an outspoken advocate of the Christian faith. Because Hinduism (or pantheism in general), has no ability to explain the existence, or the reality of evil. It cannot account for one of the greatest enigmas of life, therefore revealing one of its most glaring flaws and obstacles to being accepted as a viable system of belief.

The same is true for Bildad's system of belief. Its inability to offer an explanation for why the righteous suffer constitutes the grounds for Job's rejection of it.

And when one thinks about it, how could Job accept it?! He's a BLAMELESS MAN for whom things COULDN'T BE GOING WORSE!! He himself is a living, breathing contradiction of the most central tenet of their faith! Job couldn't be greater proof that things DON'T always go well for the blameless man!

And therefore, if they are not willing to admit that there must be exceptions to their rule, and that sometimes the righteous do suffer severely (at times even more than the wicked), then he cannot embrace their theology. He is all the proof that is needed to show that their views are either faulty, inadequate, or just plain wrong!

Wrong about what? Wrong about the fact that salvation and godliness are ultimately (according to them) rooted and grounded in “works righteousness.”

Which brings us to our **THIRD** point. Job’s conviction that God is Sovereign and salvation is by grace, and not works. I won’t go into it again, since I’ve shown over and over the fact that salvation, even in the O.T. was by grace, through faith. And that truth of salvation by grace, combined with Job’s firm belief in the sovereignty of God, is what gives him hope, and actually offers the only viable answer as to why the righteous often suffer, and the wicked often prosper—sovereignty and grace.

Grace is man receiving from God what he does NOT deserve. It is undeserved favor. It is, as one saint put it, “The unfathomable gift of Everything, for Nothing, to those who don’t deserve Anything.”

And as we saw last week, since no one on earth has ever deserved anything from God (except the wages of their sin which is death—Jesus Christ, as the sinless one, being the only exception)—that means that whatever good thing anyone ever receives is given on the basis of grace — particular grace in the case of a believer, and common grace in the case of an unbeliever.

And that’s what Job’s friends seem oblivious to. They seem to think the righteous or the blameless have a RIGHT to what they receive. It’s their DUE. By their works they somehow obligate God to give it to them. They earn the right to have it, so to speak, by their obedience, or attempts at Law-keeping.

That’s what a “works based” system always teaches at its core—
that we, by the good things we do, make God our debtor!

Yet it’s an idea Jesus attacked frequently—but never so convincingly as when he said in Luke 17:10: “After you have done everything you were told to do, you should say (to yourselves), “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.” Or in other words, with God there is no such thing as meritorious works!

Paul says the same thing in Romans 11:35 where he writes: “Who has ever given to God that God should repay him?” Or in other words: It’s not possible to make God our debtor, or ever say to Him, “You owe me!” Anyone who deals with God must deal with Him as one who **DESERVES** nothing, or more appropriately, as one who deserves nothing but punishment for their innumerable sins (as I pointed out last week).

Yet that’s the very reason that God’s ways in providence often seem so random, or arbitrary. If God operated on the basis of merit, or works righteousness, we could pretty much guarantee who would be blessed and who would be cursed. We could simply **ADD** up their moral credits and debits and calculate it mathematically, like Job’s three friends do!

The problem (at least for Job’s friends) is that God doesn’t work on the basis of merit or works! Which explains why wicked and immoral people—sinners like the tax-collectors and prostitutes often receive grace, while moral and religious people like the Pharisees and Scribes don’t!

As Paul points out in Romans 4:5: “To the man who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited to him as righteousness.” “While we were yet God’s enemies,” Paul says, “He reconciled us to Himself through the death of His Son.” (Rom. 5:10) Though we were His enemies, we received grace!

And likewise, because grace makes it impossible for us to obligate God to do anything for us, **EVEN THE RIGHTEOUS** cannot say to God: “You owe me. You must make everything go well for me. I deserve it. You must give me health, wealth and prosperity.”

Under Law, or works, the world would be a much more predictable place. But under grace it can’t be! Because grace, by its very nature, is getting what you don’t deserve, or not getting what you do deserve! And because it is, it just makes everything seem so unpredictable, or random or arbitrary—**AT LEAST TO US!!**

Yet, the truth is that God is not random, or arbitrary in any way! He is sovereign, and purposeful in all He does, yet purposeful in a way that glorifies the riches of His grace—a grace which unlike the law, is very unpredictable!

Which brings us to our **LAST** point: The Scriptural resolution of the problem. In Psalm 73, Asaph, after expressing his struggle with the fact that the wicked do prosper / enjoy healthy and strong bodies / are often free from the burdens common to man, nor plagued by human ills / and are carefree and increase in wealth (vv. 3, 4, 5, and 12) — goes on to say this in verses 14-17:

“All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.” (And he means plagued or punished in his spirit or his conscience for being so sinful as to think that because the wicked had it so easy, he had been godly for nothing (v. 13)! Plagued by the realization that he had actually contemplated betraying God, and trading in his godliness for the prosperous lifestyle of the wicked.)

But that’s not all. He was also “plagued daily” because he felt he couldn’t tell anyone about this immense struggle he was having with the apparent injustices of life. He was a priest, and if he had said “I will speak thus” (verbalizing all his doubts and struggles about God’s being unfair and unjust in blessing the wicked and not the righteous) “I would have betrayed Your children” (as he says in v. 15).

He wrestled intensely with it, but felt he couldn’t share it with others, lest by doing so, he might cause others the same agony, make them also doubt God, and thus do God’s people a great disservice. So he kept it all bottled up inside, wrestling with it in private—oppressive as it was to do so (v. 16).

But then one day, as he entered the sanctuary, the resolution to his struggle came to him, like light breaking into darkness! There in the quietness of the temple, God spoke to him and reminded him of the key to understanding the apparent discrepancies, inequities, and injustices of life:

He reminded Asaph of the final destiny of the wicked. The FINAL destiny! The fact that God does not (in most cases) meet out justice in this present life! WHY? It goes back to GRACE! It’s because “God is patient with us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to a knowledge of the truth.”

God will meet out justice impartially, and with swift, exacting precision! Every wrong will be addressed, and every wicked deed paid for—on the Day of Judgment—and throughout all eternity.

When Asaph remembered THAT his heart was at ease and his internal struggle was over!

You see, ONLY if one believes THAT, can they be at rest concerning the exceptions, and discrepancies, and glaring inequities, or injustices of life. In fact, if you don’t believe that, it would mean Asaph was right in saying: “I have kept my heart pure for nothing; in vain I have washed my hands in innocence.” And Solomon was right in saying, “Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.”

If God will not “bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil,” (as Solomon says he WILL in chapter 12, verse 14), then it is true—life is indeed meaningless, and nothing really matters!

If there are NO eternal consequences for any action, be they good or bad, then it doesn't matter what you do, and everything in life is robbed of all significance! Everything in life becomes inconsequential and irrelevant because there will never be any consequences for anything! All life therefore, becomes insignificant and emptied of all meaning—if there is no Day of Judgment!

You see, as much as people don't like to talk about a day when God will judge all sin, it is that event (and that event alone) which infuses every deed, and all of life with immense meaning and eternal significance!

Which is why Solomon can START Ecclesiastes by saying “Meaningless, meaningless everything is meaningless,” and END Ecclesiastes by declaring the only thing that remedies “meaninglessness”—“the fact that everything will be brought into judgment, whether good or bad...even the secret things” And only when one remembers that can the heart be at rest in regard to the inequities of life!