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# **When Bad Things Happen to Good People**

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## **Introduction**

Does God have limitations when it comes to his creation in order for us to have free-will? Is pain really necessary in order to appreciate life? Why do bad things happen to good people? Are tragedy random acts of events? Is it possible to heal after something so tragic happens to you? How can you use this pain? Rabbi Harold Kushner answers these hard questions within his book on *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

### **The purpose of *When Bad Things Happen to God People***

Harold Kushner wrote *When Bad Things Happen to God People* after the death of his 14 year old son, Aaron who was diagnosed with progeria. He introduces a lot of testimonies and tragic stories based on people he'd ministered to, had known or read about. Kushner suffered with personal loss so he related to how this pain would be hard to deal with when people get sick, hurt or die young not knowing why. He realizes that there was "no reason to blame God, but okay to vent" yet there were still unresolved questions... why. (p.146) It is what Kushner did with his pain that helped others cope with their tragedies as well as his own. He left self-pity and went on a journey to become a more "effective pastor" and a "sympathetic counselor." (p.179)

Kushner learns that when dealing with people who are in pain or suffering one must be comforting, let people grieve and be a listening ear. He discovers these things within his writings, not to make an excuse for God but to bring some understanding of what to do next. Kushner suggests that if we are capable of forgiving and loving people we should be in a position to forgive God, "even when we find out that He's not perfect, let you down, and disappoints you." (Kushner 2004) His book focuses on how one can use pain to gain strength and courage to pray for peace and forgiveness for things that could be random acts or the price of being human in an imperfect world. "People who pray for miracles usually don't get miracles... but people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember

what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered.” (p. 168)

### **The author’s theological views on human suffering and doctrine of God**

The author's theological outlook on God influences his experience with dealing with tragedy and later changes his views on his beliefs. He struggles with personal pain and watching others whom he’s ministered among. He has put limitations on God because He believes that God put limitations on Himself. Kushner states, “[God] is limited in what He can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and, human moral freedom.” (Kushner p. 179-80) However, he goes on to find reasons for hard answers and leans toward making excuses in God’s defense for what he believes *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* instead of why bad things happens. Kushner states, “Can I, in good faith, continue to teach people that the world is good, and that a kind and loving God is responsible for what happens in it?” (p.12)

Kushner believes that we were created above animal level because “human beings are created part animal, part divine.” (p.98-99) Everyone had access to the Tree of Life but when humans ate from the Knowledge of God and Evil tree, it created “a more complicated and painful world.” Animals don’t have this moral code and are programmed to live off built-in instinct. We face moral problems and moral decisions because “the image of God in us permits us to say No to instinct on moral grounds... All living creatures are fated to die but only human beings know it,” because we have knowledge that we are mortal, “even when no one is attacking [us].” (p.105) “These are the painful consequences of being human rather than being a mere animal.” (p.102) “In order for us to be free, in order to let us be human, God has to leave us free to choose to do right or to do wrong.” (Kushner p.108) “But God has set Himself the limit that He will not intervene to take away our freedom, including our freedom to hurt ourselves and others around us.” (Kushner p.109) “If we are not free, we are bound by circumstances and experiences, then we are no different from the animal who is bound by instinct.” (p.112)

The author states, “It was God’s sympathy, accountability, and fairness that were at issue, not His existence.” (p.57) Kushner says that God does not cause our misfortunes but it is caused by fate. “Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people and ... some are consequences of our being human and being moral, living in a world of inflexible natural laws.” (p. 180) He states that it’s a possibility that God left a system to itself that evolved in the direction of randomness were nice people are affected as well. (p.74) Kushner believes that God work through people by creating doctors, nurses, ministers, etc. who can minister on His behalf and help us get through tragedy. “That is, when we cry out to God in our anguish [and] God responds by sending us people.” (preface xi) We can recognize our anger at life’s unfairness, our instinctive compassion at seeing people suffer, as coming from God who teaches us to be angry at injustice and to feel compassion for the afflicted.” (p. 62) “The first thing prayer does for us is to put us in touch with other people, people who share the same concerns, values, dreams, and pains that we do.” (p. 161)

Kushner throughout his book compared human suffering to Job’s trials and tribulations that he’d overcome. Like in <sup>ii</sup>Job’s and his friends’ case, “Why is God doing this to me,” wasn’t a question for theology or to challenge God but of a search for sympathy.” (p. 119) Kushner reflects on the poet Archibald MacLeish’s modern story version of the biblical Job. Job chooses to go on living and creating new life. “He forgives God for not making a more just universe, and decides to take it as it is. He stops looking for justice, for fairness in the world, and looks for love instead.” (p. 195) Job answers the problem of human suffering... not with theology or psychology but by courage and strength given to him by God. “We do not love God because He is perfect, protects us, or fearful of Him. We love Him because He is God, the creator of beauty and order, the source of our strength, hope, courage, and is the best part of us as well as the rest of His creation. (p. 196)

Kushner believes that God does not send us problems, diseases or have a cure withheld. Our belief in God gives us strength and courage to those who suffer pain and the fear of death. (p. 93) He states that we should pray for strength and courage to discover that we have the will to overcome. God gives us the patience and hope to get through our problems and the strength to renew our faith. "The question of why bad things happen to good people translate itself into some very different questions, no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it has happened...The ability to forgive and the ability to love are the weapons God has given us to enable us to live fully, bravely, and meaningfully in this less than-perfect world." (p. 197-199)

### **Analysis of the author's theology**

The author use the sufferings of the biblical Job to help back his stand on what he believes of God. He also uses his personal experiences to help others with difficult circumstances that he had faced. He states that "Human beings are free to choose the direction their life will take...Granted some children are born with physical or mental capacities which limit their freedom of choice." (p.112) He applied the pain of the loss of his son to his ministry in order to help him as well as others gain strength and courage during hard times. The beginning of his book took an in your face approach that could possibly make it hard for someone who is in pain to continue reading. However, midway in the book takes a different direction that gives readers the advantage of meditating on life, God and forgiveness. It is toward the end of the book that readers can gain a better sense of direction on where to go after the pain. The problem is that in order to understand what Kushner is implying readers must read the whole book or become lost in theory on his ministering techniques. He took the hot and cold approach on explaining his methods of healing, but when it comes to pain shouldn't we be lukewarm? It could be necessary in order to win over sensitive topics and gain understanding through experiences but Scripture doesn't suggest this.

### **Problems and Resolution**

Kushner suggested that God has limitations when it comes to interfering in our lives. (p. 179-80) This is a conflict that was brought up in McGrath writings. God's sovereignty means that God is all-powerful but could possibly be viewed from a dualism perspective of lows and highs. His lows give Him absolute power of everything but His highs place "self-limitation" on his actions. (McGrath p.194) How can we continue to respect God if He is not omnipotence at all times? For beginning Christians or Atheists, this can be a dangerous notion. Pain has already made some feel abandon, so they could possibly view God as not needed in their lives. For some, would want to find someone to place guilt on and God would be the perfect choice. Kushner suggested that the reason for experiences was so we can have free-will. God needs to be presented as a mirror of our reflection so that during our lows we can benefit from God's low aurora.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, Kushner presents a good case on his triumphs over tragedy. He used his experiences so that he can be an effective pastor as well as honor his son. However, putting limitations on God can defer a newcomer to the love God has for them. Kushner was conflicted with whether God uses people to help others in pain or if God was limited on certain things. God cannot be limited if He is working through people. They are working on His behalf; therefore He gives us free-will to learn from our pain, but never leaves us in our darkest hour.

### **References**

Kushner, H. S. (2004) *When bad things happen to good people*. New York: Anchor Books.

McGrath, Alister E. (2011).5<sup>th</sup> Ed. *Christian Theology: an Introduction*. Malden, Ma & United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

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<sup>i</sup> This document was edited for clarity and understanding for young readers. However, nothing was taken out of context from the original document.

<sup>ii</sup> The Book of Job in the Holy Bible