When Bad Things Happen To Good People
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Page 2
Progeria - "rapid aging"

Page 5
If I ever find my book bogging down in technical theological explanations and ignoring the human pain which should be its subject, I hope that the memory of why I set out to write it will pull me back on course. Aaron died two days after his fourteenth birthday. This is his book, because any attempt to make sense of the world's pain and evil will be judged a success or failure based on whether it offers an acceptable explanation of why he and we had to undergo what we did. And it is his book in another sense as well—because his life made it possible, and because his death made it necessary.

Page 13
If I could meet the author of the Ninety-second Psalm, I would first congratulate him on having composed a masterpiece of devotional literature. I would acknowledge that he has said something perceptive and important about the world we live in, that being dishonest and unscrupulous often gives people a head start, but that justice catches up with them. As Rabbi Milton Steinberg has written, "Consider the pattern of human affairs: how falsehood, having no legs, cannot stand; how evil tends to destroy itself; how every tyranny eventually has invoked its own doom. Now set against this the staying power of truth and righteousness. Could the contrast be so sharp unless something in the scheme of things discouraged evil and favored the good?" (Anatomy of Faith)

Page 14
I think of an acquaintance of mine who built up a modestly successful business through many years of hard work, only to be driven into bankruptcy when he was cheated by a man he had trusted. I can tell him the victory of evil over good is only temporary, that the other person's evil ways will catch up to him. But in the meantime, my acquaintance is a tired frustrated man, no longer young, and grown cynical about the world. Who will send his children to college, who will pay the medical bills that go with advancing age, during the years it takes for God's justice to catch up with him? No matter how much I would like to believe, with Milton Steinberg, that justice will ultimately emerge, can I guarantee that he will live long enough to see himself vindicated? I find I cannot share
the optimism of the psalmist that the righteous, in the long run, will flourish like the palm tree and give testimony to God's uprightness.

Page 17

It may be that Thornton Wilder came to that conclusion himself. More than forty years after writing *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, an older and wiser Wilder returned to the question of why good people suffer in another novel, *The Eighth Day*. The book tells the story of a good and decent man whose life is ruined by bad luck and hostility. He and his family suffer although they are innocent. At the end of the novel, where the reader would hope for a happy ending, with heroes rewarded and villains punished, there is none. Instead, Wilder offers us the image of a beautiful tapestry. Looked at from the right side, it is an intricately woven work of art, drawing together threads of different lengths and colors to make up an inspiring picture. But turn the tapestry over, and you will see a hodgepodge of many threads, some short and some long, some smooth and some cut and knotted, going off in different directions. Wilder offers this as his explanation of why good people have to suffer in this life. God has a pattern into

which all of our lives fit. His pattern requires that some lives be twisted, knotted or cut short, while others extend to impressive lengths, not because one thread is more deserving than another, but simply because the pattern requires it. Looked at from underneath, from our vantage point in life, God's pattern of reward and punishment seems arbitrary and without design, like the underside of a tapestry. But looked at from outside this life, from God's vantage point, every twist and knot is seen to have its place in a great design that adds up to a work of art.

Page 21

A contemporary teacher has used this image: if a man who knew nothing about medicine were to walk into the operating room of a hospital and see doctors and nurses performing an operation, he might assume that they were a band of criminals torturing their unfortunate victim. He would see them tying the patient down, forcing a cone over his nose and mouth so that he could not breathe, and sticking knives and needles into him. Only someone who understood surgery would realize that they were doing all this to help the patient, not to torment him. So too, it is suggested, God does painful things to
us as His way of helping us.

Page 23
I would find it easier to believe that I experience tragedy and suffering in order to "repair" that which is faulty in my personality if there were some clear connection between the fault and the punishment. A parent who disciplines a child for doing something wrong, but never tells him what he is being punished for, is hardly a model of responsible parenthood. Yet, those who explain suffering as God's way of teaching us to change are at a loss to specify just what it is about us we are supposed to change.

Page 26
If God is testing us, He must know by now that many of us fail the test. If He is only giving us burdens we can bear, I have seen Him miscalculate far too often.

Page 29
Belief in a world to come where the innocent are compensated for their suffering can help people endure the unfairness of life in this world without losing faith.

But it can also be an excuse for not being troubled or outraged by injustice around us, and not using our God-given intelligence to try to do something about it. The dictate of practical wisdom for people in our situation might be to remain mindful of the possibility that our lives continue in some form after death, perhaps in a form our earthly imaginations cannot conceive of. But at the same time, since we cannot know for sure, we would be well advised to take this world as seriously as we can, in case it turns out to be the only one we will ever have, and to look for meaning and justice here.
We can maintain our own self-respect and sense of goodness without having to feel that God has judged us and condemned us. We can be angry at what has happened to us, without feeling that we are angry at God. More than that, 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. Instead of feeling that we are opposed to God, we can feel that our indignation is God's anger at unfairness working through us, that when we cry out, we are still on God's side, and He is still on ours.

So it was with God, fashioning a world whose overriding principle was orderliness, predictability, in place of the chaos with which He started: regular sunrises and sunsets, regular tides, plants and animals that bore seeds inside them so that they could reproduce themselves, each after its own kind. By the end of the sixth day, God had finished the world He had set out to make, and on the seventh day He rested.

He replied by citing the second law of thermodynamics, the law of entropy: Every system left to itself will change in such a way as to approach equilibrium. He explained that this meant the world was changing in the direction of more randomness.

One hurricane might veer off to sea, sparing the coastal cities, but it would be a mistake to see any evidence of pattern or purpose to that. Over the course of time, some hurricanes will blow harmlessly out to sea, while others will head into populated areas and cause devastation. The longer you keep track of such things, the less of a pattern you will find.

The story is told of a youngster who came home from Sunday school, having been taught the Biblical story of the crossing of the Red Sea. His mother asked him what he had learned in class, and he told her: "The Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharoah and his army chased after them. They got to the Red Sea and they couldn't cross it. The Egyptian army was getting closer. So Moses got on his walkie-talkie,
the Israeli air force bombed the Egyptians, and the Israeli navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross." The mother was shocked. "Is that the way they taught you the story?" "Well, no," the boy admitted, "but if I told it to you the way they told it to us, you would never believe it."

Page 57

But we today are like the little boy in the Sunday school story. We are told those stories and we are skeptical. If anything, we find proof of God precisely in the fact that laws of nature do not change. God has given us a wonderful, precise, orderly world. One of the things that makes the world livable is the fact that the laws of nature are precise and reliable, and always work the same way. There is gravity: heavy objects always fall toward the earth, so a builder can build a house without having his materials float away. There is chemistry: mixing certain elements in certain proportions always yields the same result, so a doctor can prescribe medication and know what will happen. We can predict when the sun will rise and set on any given day. We can even predict when the moon will block the sun for certain areas, causing an eclipse. To the ancients, an eclipse was an unnatural event which they interpreted as God's way of warning them. To us, it is a perfectly natural event, a reminder of how precise a universe God has given us.
Page 57

Our human bodies are miracles, not because they defy laws of nature, but precisely because they obey them. Our digestive systems extract nutrients from food. Our skins help to regulate body temperature by perspiring. The pupils of our eyes expand and contract in response to light. Even when we get sick, our bodies have built in defense mechanisms to fight the illness. All these wonderful things happen, usually without our being aware of them, in accordance with the most precise laws of nature. That, not the legendary splitting of the Red Sea, is the real miracle.

Laws of nature do not make exceptions for nice people. A bullet has no conscience; neither does a malignant tumor or an automobile gone out of control. That is why good people get sick and get hurt as much as anyone. No matter what stories we were taught about Daniel or Jonah in Sunday school, God does not reach down to interrupt the workings of laws of nature to protect the righteous from harm. This is a second area of our world which causes bad things to happen to good people, and God does not cause it and cannot stop it.

12

Insurance companies refer to earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters as "acts of God". I consider that a case of using God's name in vain. I don't believe that an earthquake that kills thousands of innocent victims without reason is an act of God. It is an act of nature. Nature is morally blind, without values. It churns along, following its own laws, not caring who or what gets in the way. But God is not morally blind. I could not worship Him if I thought He was. God stands for justice, for fairness, for compassion. For me, the earthquake is not an "act of God." The act of God is the courage of people to rebuild their lives after the earthquake, and the rush of others to help them in whatever way they can.
Being sick or being healthy is not a matter of what God decides that we deserve. The better question is "if this has happened to me, what do I do now, and who is there to help me do it?"

As we saw in the previous chapter, it becomes much easier to take God seriously as the source of moral values if we don't hold Him responsible for all the unfair things that happen in the world.

Consider the following: scientists have found ways of measuring the intensity of the pain we feel. They can measure the fact that a migraine headache hurts more than a skinned knee. And they have determined that two of the most painful things human beings can experience are giving birth and passing a kidney stone. From a purely physical point of view, these two events both hurt equally, and hardly anything hurts more. But from a human point of view, the two are so different. The pain of passing a kidney stone is simply pointless suffering, the result of a natural malfunction somewhere in our body. But the pain of giving birth is creative pain. It is pain that has meaning, pain that gives life, that leads to something. That is why the person who passes a kidney stone will usually say "I'd give anything not to have to go through that again," but the woman who has given birth to a child, like the runner or mountain climber who has driven his body to reach a goal, can transcend her pain and contemplate repeating the experience.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, there is a passage in which Ulysses meets Calypso, a sea princess and a child of the gods. Calypso, a divin being, is immortal. She will never die. She is fascinated by Ulysses, never having met a mortal before. As we read on, we come to realize the Calypso envies Ulysses because he will not live forever. His life becomes more full of meaning, his every decision is more significant, precisely because his time is limited, and what he chooses to do with it represents a real choice.
This is what it means to be human "in the image of God". It means being free to make choices instead of doing whatever instincts tell us to do. It means knowing that some choices are good, and others are bad, and it is our job to know the difference.

Now imagine God saying to a person, "How do you plan to get the money to pay your bills? Are you going to get a job, which means getting up early in the morning and doing hard work, or are you going to grab an old lady's pocketbook and run off with it?" The man answers, "I was thinking of going out and stealing a pocketbook." God says, "No, that's wrong. I won't let you do that. Choose again." This time the man reluctantly agrees to get a job. A robbery has been prevented, but has the man been permitted to operate as a morally free human being? Has God permitted him to choose between the path of good and the path of evil? Or has God reduced him to the level of an animal by taking away his freedom to choose, and compelling him to take the better path?

In order to let us be free, in order to let us be human, God has to leave us free to choose to do right or to do wrong. If we are not free to choose evil, then we are not free to choose good either. Like the animals, we can only be convenient or inconvenient, obedient or disobedient. We can no longer be moral, which means we can no longer be human.