

God and Evil: The Power of Love

"Love does not coerce or CAUSE a response – it desires, lures, and attracts a response, but it does not compel. I therefore do not believe that God CAUSES anything. Everything that happens, happens out of the potentials of the present and restraints of the past. The lure of God's love is one of the potentials that is always present in every moment, but it is not the only one. And it may not be the one that is accepted to guide the choices made."

John 9:1-7

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

See also a parallel question in Luke 13:1-5

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

1 John 4:7-12, 16b-21

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

This question that opens the passage we read this morning from the Gospel according to John raises a question we still ask today:

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Or, to put the question more specifically in the context of our faith:

Why does a good God cause – or allow – bad things to happen to good people?

Today, we live in a scientific and medical age. If a baby were born blind today, we would go to a doctor or scientist, not a priest, for an explanation; and expect to receive an answer about genetics or foetal development or hormones or ... anything except sin.

And so as we ask **OUR** questions about why do bad things happen to good people, we have to be careful to understand how this question was answered in Biblical times.

In Biblical times – and in all ancient cultures – it was understood that something happened only if someone caused it. There was no concept of "the laws of nature," of gravity and such. What could clearly be seen was that if you came across a road or a well, it was there because someone had put it there.

And so in the same way, things that happened that were not caused by humans, had to be put there by invisible beings – gods or other spirits. Where did the rain come from? An invisible rain god. Where did the crops come from? An invisible plant god. Why was there no rain, no crops? The gods were unhappy, and humans needed to offer sacrifices that would make the gods happy again.

Although the faith of the Jews was that there was only one God, not many, they still understood that everything that happened was caused by God.

But.

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Since their faith also led them to understand that God was good, and that God was trustworthy and unchangeably desiring peace, justice and the well-being of all; why then did our good God cause – or allow – bad things to happen to good people?

Their answer – which we heard in the reading from John this morning – was that bad things happened because of human sinfulness. That is:

*Because God is good,
there must be a good reason
why bad things happen.*

Just like there must be a good reason why good things happen.

There can be no such thing as undeserved good things or undeserved bad things.

EVERYTHING must be deserved some way or other. **EVERYTHING** must be explainable – understandable – in some way or other.

Now I agree that bad things **DO** happen because of human sinfulness – not because God punishes us for being bad. But simply because God's ways are the ways that lead to life, and not following those ways will inevitably lead to suffering. And because of human greed, exploitation and abuse – the suffering is all too often experienced by the most vulnerable and innocent.

But the case of a baby born blind presses the question to a deeper level.

How could a baby have sinned? How could a baby have done anything that would cause God to make it be born blind? The answer – which the disciples suggest – is that because of the parent's sin God caused their child to be born blind. That is the understandable reason for this "deserved" bad thing.

I don't know about you, but I don't find that a very satisfactory answer. Why should an innocent baby suffer because of something its parent's did? That doesn't seem fair.

Unfortunately, no answers to this question "feel good" to me.

And, to be frank, I'm not sure that there could be any "feel good" answer in the face of the reality of the evil and suffering that there is in our world.

I am aware that all of you are living with situations that raise the question of where is God in the face of this suffering? In my own life, my father was killed in an accident when he was 40, and my sister died of cancer when she was 23. Where was God? Why did our good God cause – or allow – those bad things to happen?

My response to those questions still doesn't "feel good" to me. But it is rooted in the conviction that a core, unshakable, unchangeable truth about God is that God is love.

God is what love is.

God always and only does what love does.

God has all the power that love has – no more, no less.

Now love is powerful. Many of us have changed the course of our lives because of love. Made life decisions because of love: love for a spouse, love for a child, love for a parent, love for a stranger, love for the planet.

Love is powerful; but it is not **ALL**-powerful.

For example, how many of you who are parents have been able to always and only relate to your children through the power of love?

How many of you have at least sometimes resorted to bribes? Or threats? Or consequences? Have "lost it," and resorted to anger or force?

Love is not **ALL**-powerful because it relies on a response from the ones being loved. And sometimes the ones being loved will ignore the power of love, and simply go their own way. Love does not coerce or **CAUSE** a response – it desires, lures, and attracts a response, but it does not compel. And because God **IS** love - is what love is - what is true about love is true about God.

I believe that God **CAUSES** nothing. Instead, God **LOVES** everything - desires everything to be in complete alignment with God's love for it.

Everything that happens, happens out of the potentials of the present and restraints of the past. The lure of God's love is one of the potentials that is always present in every moment, but it is not the only one. And it may not be the one that is accepted to guide the choices made.

I believe that our universe is what it is today through an interaction of the "laws of nature" and the divine lure of God's love.

The "laws of nature" provide for both remarkable continuity and stability, and for evolution and novelty. We now know that the universe is not a machine; is not 100% knowable and predictable; is not 100% determined. Amidst all that can be known and predicted, there is also much that is uncertain, unknowable, random, and completely unprecedented.

In other words, there is true novelty, true freedom, and true choice. And it is precisely at the point of freedom and choice that the power of God's love is at work – seeking at each and every moment to lure the choice towards God's desire for justice, peace, beauty and intimacy. God's love is powerful, but it is not all-powerful in shaping the choices that are made.

The same force of gravity that keeps the planets in place, also meant that at a certain point the collision that killed my father was unavoidable. The same process of random mutations that results in the amazing evolution of diversity, beauty and resilience of life was also at work in my sister's cancer.

Do I want the planets to stay in their course? Do I want the amazing evolution of life to continue? It seems then that I must also accept the unavoidable reality of accidents and disease.

But where then is our good God? Where then is "the power of love?"

But let's also ask:

Is God's love deserved?

Or for that matter:

Is the kind of love we actually desire ever deserved?

It seems to me that the answer is, "No." The love we actually desire is never deserved; never earned; never merited.

We are always unworthy of the love we receive.

There is no explaining why we are loved.

The kind of love we actually desire always arises wholly and completely within those who love us – because of who **THEY** are; not because of who **WE** are. Their love for us is spontaneous, natural-to-them, undeserved-by-us, and ultimately unexplainable.

Why does God love me? Not because of anything I am or have done. (And certainly there is absolutely no way of me explaining why God loves **YOU**. (Just kidding.))

God loves me because of who God is. God **IS** love.

But because God's love for me – and you – is **NOT** deserved – it is also not explainable.

If I could **EXPLAIN** it; it would make it understandable; make it reasonable; make it make sense; make it seem like there was a good reason why God loves me; make it deserved in other words.

So. God's love is neither deserved nor explainable.

In other words, God's love is grace – it is freely given just because of who God is – it is undeserved, and unexplainable.

But what is true about God's love – that it is undeserved and unexplainable – is also true about anything that is undeserved.

Anything that is undeserved is also unexplainable. Because, (repeat after me):

*If I could **EXPLAIN** it; it would make it understandable; make it reasonable; make it make sense; make it seem like there was a good reason for it; make it deserved in other words.*

Do you really want a good explanation for why an undeserved bad thing has happened?

If I could **EXPLAIN** why my father died in an accident and my sister died of cancer wouldn't that make their deaths ... reasonable?

Their deaths are undeserved. And therefore, also unexplainable. Living with suffering and tragedy that is unexplainable doesn't "feel good." But it sure feels better than living with suffering and tragedy that is reasonable. I don't know about you but the thought that my father's and sister's deaths might be "**REASONABLE**" makes me angry as hell.

But God's love was fully present at every moment leading up to, at the moment of, and at every moment after their deaths. God was fully present with the power of love; with all the power that love has.

God – with all the power that love has – did indeed seek to influence and change the choices that led to my father's accident; and to influence and change the results of my sister's cancer treatments.

But in both cases, I do **NOT** believe God "caused" these things to happen; nor "allowed" them (meaning God actually could have prevented them from happening but chose not to). God was present with all the power that love has – no more, no less. And in these cases, other forces and choices prevailed. But it was **NOT** God who **CAUSED** or **ALLOWED** these deaths.

But I also believe that ultimately it is the power of God's love that prevails. Even over death.

In this life, material realities, mortal realities, finite realities – all fail to remain fully aligned with God's love.

But in the life to come, my vision of paradise is that, freed of our flesh-bound limitations, our stupidities and faults; and freed also from the physical "laws of nature;" we finally are in a place where other forces and choices no longer prevail. Where the power of God's love is all there is. And where tears are dried, all injuries and disease are healed, all wrongs and scars are forgiven and healed, and all relationships are restored to the way God intended and desired them to be.

I wish I didn't have to wait till then. And I guess that is why Jesus teaches us to pray here and now ...

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven ...

because right now in heaven, God's will **IS** done; in paradise God's love is all there is.

Amen to that.

May the power of God's love direct our lives and guide all our choices.

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