

How Private Ryan Was Saved

(When Good Things Happen to Bad People)

Some years ago, a best-selling book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* attempted to explain why a good, all-powerful God allows suffering. Its popularity was based on a cherished but false assumption about human nature. The book's title begs the old joke in which a city slicker gets lost on his way to town and asks a farmer for directions. "You can't get there from here," the farmer shrugs.

From a Christian perspective, that is, there simply are no good people.

"Good teacher," a rich man asked Jesus, "what must I do to receive eternal life?" (Mark 10:18ff)

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus replied. "No one is good except God alone."

Jesus' self-deprecation here is startling, but we soon see why He's quick to make such a radical distinction. When He instructs the man to keep the basic biblical Law, the man declares, "Ever since I was young, I have obeyed all these commandments."

Jesus knows that someone so convinced that he's good needs to be jarred into humility before he can be saved. Otherwise, he thinks he doesn't need God. And so Jesus instructs the rich man to give away his riches to the poor. Here, at last, is a commandment he cannot obey, and he's broken. "At this, the man's face fell, and he went away sad."

"There is no difference at all," the Apostle Paul echoes; "everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence" (Rom. 3:22-23).

Real as it may be, our not-good-ness stirs shame, and we balk. When we encounter suffering, we ask, "Why me?" As in the rich young man before Jesus, our self-centered human nature assures us that we're basically pretty good—and therefore don't deserve such misfortune.

From a biblical perspective, however, God's answer might well be, "Why *not* you?" That is, "You're a sinner like everyone else; what makes you think you should be exempt from the fallout of a sinful world?" Bad things happen to us all--at times, simply because we live in a fallen world and that fallenness lives in us. As Jesus noted, God "sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" alike (Mt. 5:45).

Sure, it seems unfair. But if you want to shake your fist at God and demand, "Give me what I deserve!" wait just a minute, please, so I can step away before the lightning toasts you.

Like the rich man Jesus upends, those of us who are doing pretty well in the world can allow our material comfort to lull us into the fantasy of our own goodness. But if we really want to know what it takes to gain eternal life and not just to gain more comfort here and now, we need to face our unworthiness.

Why do bad things happen to good people (like me)? is therefore a self-satisfied civilian question. Only those who fancy themselves to be good would bother to ask it. It's the narcissistic pouting of pampered flesh not yet surrendered to be crucified with the King of Kings (Rom. 12:1-2). Worse, it's a cover-up for the powers of evil that war against God's purposes—not just "out there" in others, but in our own hearts.

The warrior, on the other hand, sees life differently, because he experiences it within the larger reality of evil and death. The wrenching WWII film *Saving Private Ryan* portrays this contrast graphically.

Amid indiscriminate bloodshed and carnage, Private Ryan is indeed rescued by a platoon, most of whom die in the effort. Fifty years later we see him pudgy and gray, kneeling in a military cemetery as thousands of white crosses surround him in severe witness. No hero here, just a tormented survivor--humbled, but not humiliated; lost in the mystery, but found at last by its Author. One who has faced the awful reality of evil and death not only on the world's battlefield, but also in his own unworthy heart.

"Why me?" he whimpers.

Here, at last, are the makings of a Kingdom warrior. One who's been saved not by any virtue of his own, but by the sacrificial grace of another. He's not demanding to know, Why did I suffer? He's begging to know, Why was I spared? He seeks mercy, not vindication. He's overwhelmed—and properly so--by the mystery of grace: Why do I still live, and even prosper, when so many braver men more worthy than me lie dead, even for saving me?"

Why do good things happen to bad people (like me)? This is the question required of every man and woman who dares kneel at the foot of the Cross and call Jesus, the most worthy of men, "Lord." Both blessed in its truth and awe-ful in its grace, this question stands between every one of us and eternal life. It's the gateway to God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven—that is, to walking out Jesus' resurrection victory in a world broken unto death.

When no honest men kneel thus in the shadow of the cross, no genuine warriors are left to dare ask this question. And so, the Enemy divides and conquers us. *Diabolos*, the root word for "devil" (as in diabolic) comes from two parts: *di* (split in two, as in di-vide) + *abol* (as in abolish or destroy).

At the political/theological extremes, one faction declares that there is no sin and evil, that we're all good. The problem is, we haven't been educated to realize how good we all are. Under the banner of "Tolerance and Inclusivity," this heresy beckons the demon of universalism, which fuels the current shame-less "politically correct" ideology. It's grace without truth.

The other faction declares that there is only sin and evil, that we're all bad. The problem is, we haven't tried hard enough to be good. Under the banner of "Judgment and Exclusivity," this heresy beckons the demon of religion, which fuels a variety of shame-full, "measure up to these standards and you'll gain eternal life" spirituality. It's truth without grace.

Meanwhile, God's busy working out another plan: "God gave the Law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). God did not send Jesus to bring us religion—Moses did that—nor to enforce tolerance for behavior that harms His beloved children.

The truth is, that from our genesis, we were indeed created good. But through the draw of evil we lost our innocence, and sin entered and infected our human nature unto death.

The grace is, that Jesus has come to bear the shame of our otherwise unbearable not-good-ness, and thereby restore our innocence. You can fall on your knees, cry out your unworthiness to Him, let His Spirit restore you daily to your created good-ness as God's child—and thereby, become free at last to get on with your destiny, both now and forever. The warrior is not taken out of battle by this humility, but indeed, commissioned by it, for it positions him to rest in the Father's presence and follow His lead as Commander-in-Chief.

That's why good things happen to bad people (like us): Because the Father whose love endures forever (Ps. 118:2) has a plan for our lives and the power to accomplish it (Ephes. 2:8-10). He wants us to come to Him so He can do that. He therefore won't abide our being seduced away from His truth by universalistic tolerance, or blinded to His grace by religious judgment.

Let's not surrender to the world's charade of "judgment vs. tolerance," where truth and grace are enemies. Instead, let's get real and surrender to Jesus. You can get there from here.