



## CHAPTER THREE: WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE

Excerpted from  
*GRIEF AND GOD: When Religion Does More Harm Than Healing*  
by Dr. Terri Daniel

To begin an investigation of toxic theology, we must first consider, as a foundation, the theological view that characterizes God as a humanoid figure with two opposing faces. One is the face of a loving parent/trusted protector, and the other is the face of a harsh parent/unreliable protector. With this opposition informing our deepest theological uncertainties, where can traumatized people place their faith? Can we learn to be comfortable with the tension between the two faces? Can anger be directed at the harsh parent/unreliable protector while still having faith that the loving parent/reliable protector is present? Viewed from another perspective, if God only has one face, and that face is supposed to be goodness and love, then how do we explain suffering?

The question of why a loving God would allow tragedy to befall even the most pious person is ancient and universal, and has plagued humanity since the onset of monotheistic thought. For many religious people, suffering is seen as either a punishment for sin, interference by Satan, or a random experience that belongs to the realm of mystery, beyond our ability to understand. As evangelical Christian scholars Maxwell and Perrine described in their analysis of *The Problem of God in the Presence of Grief*:

“For some, God’s presence brings various forms of positive aid to the process of grief... Yet, for others, God’s presence further compounds difficulty and guilt. For some, sadness over loss is well understood, whereas in others it is perceived as a lack of sufficient faith in God... The danger of addressing grief with theology is that it can inevitably reduce a complex and often bewildering phenomenon to a constraining ideology that may even result in the imposition of harm rather than relief. The helpfulness of God for grief is therefore not uniformly felt.”<sup>114</sup>

I do not presume to know why bad things happen to good people. But I *do* know that there are ways to incorporate spirituality into grief work that do not rely on traditional definitions of good vs. bad experiences or conventional qualifiers of faith. I also know that for those who have not ventured beyond scriptural literalism and traditional doctrines, these questions repeatedly surface in the wake of trauma:

- . Is suffering randomly dispensed by an all-powerful God for reasons beyond our understanding?

- . Is suffering a punishment for bad (unfaithful, non-believing) behavior?
- . Does devotion and faithfulness guarantee safety and protection?
- . If the god of the Hebrew Bible promised his chosen people abundant rewards in exchange for devotion and obedience, then how do we explain the holocaust?
- . If Jesus died for our sins and the stain of original sin was cleansed from humanity, then why was sin not removed from the world with his death?

Bishop Spong asks us to consider whether God can still be real if we dismiss all images of God as a parent and personalistic deity. He proposes that this question can be answered by simply shifting the way we look at human experience, and that we can begin by referring to God as a “what” instead of a “who.”<sup>115</sup> Imagine referring to God as “it” instead of “he” (or “she”). Imagine how different our relationship with the spiritual realm would be if we used language such as “*It* created us,” or “*It* is all-powerful.”

I once suggested this to a woman I met at a conference, and she was horrified. She said, “God’s going to punish you for calling him an *it*.”

Human beings create religious doctrines and dogmas to explain existence, rationalize suffering and control behavior. Noted philosopher and psychologist William James said that we create gods that are useful to us because they reinforce the demands we make on ourselves and on others.<sup>116</sup> In other words, our images of God are *projections*. Bishop Spong postulates that the Western mystics perceived the idea of a personal god as only a transitory stage in human development (similar to the what Fowler described in the stages of faith development). Spong cautions us to remember that the spiritual quest is an interior journey rather than an exterior one.<sup>117</sup>

The ancient Israelites assigned religious meaning to their misfortunes by deciding that God was punishing them for their sins,<sup>118</sup> which assumes there is also a converse action whereby God rewards *good* deeds. But as we learn from the stories of every righteous person that has ever suffered, the reward/punishment model does not stand up to scrutiny.

### **Shattered Assumptions**

We go through our lives holding on to certain assumptions about how the world works. If we didn’t believe, for example, that marriages should last forever and children shouldn’t die before their parents, we would be less likely to risk getting married or having children. Psychology professor Ronni Janoff-Bulman suggests that there are three fundamental assumptions common in Western thinking:<sup>119</sup>

- . The world is benevolent
- . The world is meaningful
- . The self is worthy

We can find examples of this in our society’s list of moral “shoulds,” including:

- . Bad things shouldn't happen to good people
- . If I'm faithful in my religion, I should be protected by God
- . A child should not die before its parents
- . If I treat others well, they should treat me well in return

There are also mundane, day-to-day assumptions that are critical to our functioning. We assume that:

- . When we drive to work or fly on a plane, we will arrive safely.
- . Our job will support us so we can buy a house and get a dog.
- . We will keep that house until we decide to sell it.
- . The dog won't get hit by a car or bite the mailman.
- . Our spouse is faithful
- . Our children are safe at school

We cannot survive without these assumptions. If we didn't cling to them, we would never buy a house, get a dog, drive a car or send our children to school. We would not take any risks at all. Life would *stop*.

Janoff-Bulman tells us that our theories about how life works are organized in a hierarchy, with our most basic assumptions being the most generalized and abstract. These assumptions are based on an expectation of safety in the world. They compose "the bedrock of our conceptual system," so they are the assumptions we are least likely challenge.<sup>120</sup> When tragic events challenge these expectations, a state of mind is created that Janoff-Bulman calls "conceptual disintegration." In this state, she tells us, "previous notions about the value of the self have been brutally broken, leaving the traumatized person feeling small, powerless and weak in a world without kindness or beneficence... the opposite of the world one occupied before the event."<sup>121</sup>

This shock to the system -- this dark night of the soul -- can apply to the way we respond to losses of any kind, whether a death, a divorce, loss of a job, loss of health, loss of a role or identity, or any circumstance that forces us to re-evaluate our understanding of the three primary assumptions. The natural death of an 85 year-old man is predictable and expected, and although his loved ones will grieve, such a death does not challenge our assumptions about how life is supposed to work. However, a tragic, unexpected loss -- a betrayal of trust, the death of a young person, natural disasters, or any death by violence -- will cause us to question our assumption that the world is safe, meaningful and benevolent.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, in discussing his book *Reality, Grief and Hope*, looks at how cultural groups and nations can be shaken out of their sense of exceptionalism when a traumatic communal loss occurs. He specifically cites the exile of the Israelites in the sixth century BCE and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. In both cases, the victimized group had a sense of entitlement, either as a special protection from God or as an impenetrable political power in the world. When that protection failed, the group was shocked into a new awareness of its vulnerability.<sup>122</sup>

A disruption in beliefs about safety and justice will prompt either the acceptance of a new world based on what Janoff-Bulman calls "powerful new data,"<sup>123</sup> or clinging to an old reality

that is no longer viable. This is a pivotal choice in the healing process, and if a grieving or traumatized person cannot shift into a new understanding of reality and the new world that accompanies it, he/she is at risk for *complicated grief* (which will be discussed in Chapter Four).

## The Book of Job

The ancient Israelites attempted to directly address the question of suffering in *The Book of Job*, which explored these themes in terms of human suffering:

- Is loyalty to God rewarded?
- Does God punish us?
- Does God test us?
- The importance of questioning God
- The apparent randomness of suffering

Janoff-Bulman says the popularity of the Book of Job is a reflection of our attachment to the three basic human assumptions of benevolence, meaningfulness and worthiness.<sup>124</sup> This is why we are so uncomfortable with the juxtaposition between Job's suffering and his innocence.<sup>125</sup>

Bishop Spong refers to the Book of Job as "an icon of new consciousness"<sup>126</sup> because it forces us to look at the absence of fairness in human experience. He reminds us that one of the pillars of Jewish thought is the idea that one who obeys the laws and worships God properly will be rewarded, and if one does not do this, the vengeance of God is sure to follow. This idea establishes a system of organization, logic and purpose vs. chaos and meaninglessness.<sup>127</sup> But Job's situation -- as a righteous man who lost everything for no apparent reason -- turned that logic upside down. If blessings can't be earned and wrongdoing isn't punished, then where is the logic, safety and predictability in life?

Richard Elliott Friedman, an author, scholar and professor of Jewish studies, offers this explanation of how the reward and punishment system originated in Jewish theology. As he explains it, during the Israelites' exile in Babylon in 500 BCE, because their history and culture was threatened with extinction, they began to *write* their story, which for the past 1000 years had only been transmitted orally. They needed to create a strong presence that could stand up to the oppressive regimes that surrounded them, so they constructed the image of a powerful god that promised special benefits to their tribe, including victory over their enemies.

The way the scribes packaged these concepts was based on the assumption that God is "fair," and as such, good people would be rewarded while bad people would be punished.<sup>128</sup> But if the writing of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the bible, which are also the *Torah*; the cornerstone of Jewish law and history), did occur during this period of exile, it would have been difficult for the oppressed people to trust in these promises, since finding themselves without a homeland would imply that either God's promises had been broken, or the tribe had committed some grievous error for which they were now being punished. Special protection by God was nowhere to be found at this point in Jewish history, so the writing that took place reflected the

tribe's grief and sense of powerlessness. To justify their loss of status and security, it was necessary to invent an unpredictable, punitive god who was angry at them for a variety of transgressions. As Friedman states, "In Pagan religion, if another nation defeats you, you can say their god was more powerful than your god. But in monotheism, if you're suffering, it must be because you did something wrong"<sup>129</sup>

The Book of Job attempts to show that punishment isn't the only explanation. Although it offers no real conclusion or concrete guidance, it does give us permission to question, which is perhaps its most valuable gift. If we view the world in terms of justice (in this context, a "just god"), then the world tends to be divided into the consequences of good vs. bad behavior, in which positive events are rewards and negative events are punishment.<sup>130</sup> But that leaves the bereaved, the oppressed, the marginalized, the sick, the homeless, the lonely and everyone else who is suffering to think that punishment is the reason for their misfortune.

Morrow tells us that "the over-controlling monotheism of perfectionist retribution theology is shown to deprive suffering persons of dignity and hope for life." He sees the theology of Job as a repressive and toxic belief system that betrays the dignity of God, the cosmos and humanity.<sup>131</sup> In Job's world, the popular thinking of the day was based on the idea that humanity is at the center of the universe and the pinnacle of creation. Job's experience asks him to consider a complete theological renovation; a reconstruction of his view of the universe and the structure of his world. Traumatic events, loss and grief invite us to do the same... to re-vision and rebuild our definition of how the world and the universe works. As Morrow says, removing the anthropomorphic view of God, and understanding that the cosmos does not have humanity at its center can be therapeutic and healing, relieving suffering by sparing us from seeing every bad experience as something for which we can be blamed.<sup>132</sup>

## God on Trial

In 2008, a British screenwriter created a television play called *God on Trial*,<sup>133</sup> which was based on a story from Elie Wiesel's 1995 book *The Trial of God*. The play is set in the Auschwitz concentration camp in World War II, and the characters are a group of Jewish prisoners, among them, a rabbi, a physicist, and a law professor. The group struggles with the conflict between their religious beliefs and the horrific world in which they now find themselves. In an attempt to make sense of why the god who promised them security and protection would now allow them to experience unimaginable suffering with little hope for rescue, the men enact a mock trial for the person they believe is responsible for their dilemma... God. They accuse God of "breach of contract" for breaking his covenant with the Jewish people. After all, they reasoned, if the Torah is the law, then the law has been broken.

In the mock trial, each man played a role, such as a prosecutor, defense attorney and expert witnesses. All of Jewish history and theology was questioned on the witness stand, including the exodus story, the covenant with Abraham and the violent acts committed by Yahweh throughout the Hebrew Bible. The primary question in their case was whether or not God is "good." Inquiries from the prosecution included:

- During the plagues of Egypt, why did God let Pharaoh live, but killed all the children? How could this possibly convince the mothers of Egypt that the God of the Israelites was just? 134
- Why did God wait until the soldiers were crossing through the opening in the Red Sea to close the waters back up, drowning them all? Why didn't he just close the waters after the Israelites had safely crossed, sparing the lives of the soldiers? 135
- Why did God command his people to destroy the communities that were already established in the promised land, rather than allowing the Israelites to live peacefully among them? 136
- God rejected Saul as King because he didn't obey God's command to kill all the people and animals in Amalek. Saul killed men, women and children, as instructed, but spared the Kenites and the best sheep and cattle (to feed his army). God rejected him as king because he didn't obey to the letter.<sup>137</sup>
- David killed Bathsheba's husband Uriah against the wishes of God. Did God strike David or Bathsheba? No. He punished their child with a torturous death.<sup>138</sup>

Their verdict provoked a sweeping range of contrasting interpretations, justifications and further questioning that challenged the magical thinking of their theology:<sup>139</sup>

- God is just, so we must have done something wrong.
- God is our enemy. He has made a new covenant with someone else.
- How would it be if this is not a punishment, but a purification? What if those who survive this would live in an age of wisdom, understanding and knowledge? What if some great good were to come of this?"
- It's all written down. It's a covenant. God is in breach of contract.
- Did God not also make the Egyptians, and the Amaleks, and the Moabites? God is smiting us now, the same way he smote them. They fell, as we are falling. And what did they learn? They learned that our god is not good. He was never good. They learned the he was only on our side.

One of the most thought-provoking comments -- which prompts us to think rationally instead of magically -- came from the physicist, who said, "God made a hundred thousand million stars, and each one might have a planetary system like ours revolving around it. So why would this god focus his attention on humans, and on Jews in particular? It is simply wrong. An illusion. We are not at the center of the universe."<sup>140</sup>

Frank Rogers, professor of spiritual formation at Claremont School of Theology, tells us that compassion is considered a cornerstone teaching of the Jewish Torah.<sup>141</sup> But Yahweh's behavior

throughout the Hebrew Bible is anything but compassionate. So with contradiction built in to the fabric of our religious education, it is understandable that a traumatized person cannot connect the dots when a supposedly compassionate God inflicts unimaginable pain on its creations.

Since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most scholars have come to support a theory called the *documentary hypothesis*, which addresses the ways in which the Bible's first books were written and assembled. The hypothesis states that writers in antiquity created numerous written works over hundreds of years, and that these documents were used as sources for later writers and editors who "wrote" the Bible as we know it. To date, as Friedman explains, scholars have identified four different schools of authorship for the Pentateuch, and have dated the writing of these books to the period of the Jewish exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE.<sup>142</sup>

Yet millions of the faithful believe that these books were written by Moses during the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, even though there is no archeological evidence that such a mass exodus even occurred, or that the Israelites were ever enslaved by Egypt at all.<sup>143</sup> The cultural attachment to a literal belief that God promised the land of Canaan to his chosen people is at the core of the conflict between Israel and Palestine today. Yet very few people who have passionate opinions about this conflict are aware that it is based on the myth that there is a god who likes some people better than others, makes promises, and negotiates real estate deals.

If, as archeological evidence and historical inquiry suggests, most of the Hebrew Bible was written during the Jewish exile in Babylon, it leaves a large gap between the written record and the events of 1000 years earlier that the record is describing. The land that we now know as Israel was not a powerful kingdom, but a small town or village overshadowed by the enormous power of Babylon and Egypt. Friedman suggests that its leaders and priests, in order to establish a sense of power that could compete with other nations, created the idea of an all-powerful god that took a special liking to their tribe and promised to transform them into a great nation.<sup>144</sup> This idea, mixed with stories and legends handed down verbally for centuries, found its way into the writings of the scribes who wrote while in exile. They had heard for generations, through oral tradition, that they had been promised God's favor and would become world leaders if they followed God's laws. But now they found themselves imprisoned in a foreign land with no nation, no temple for worship, no identity, no political or social power and no special protection from God. In writing their story, they had to find a way to justify their loss of status in God's eyes.

Literal interpretation of stories like these, where God makes special deals with special people and then punishes them brutally for not following the letter of the law, creates a foundation for judgment and separation rather than peace and harmony; self-loathing rather than personal empowerment; and a relationship with the divine that is based on fear rather than love.

### **Allegory vs. Actuality**

Dr. Steven Hairfield compiled an amazing analysis of biblical symbolism in his book, *A Metaphysical Interpretation of the Bible*. He focused a lot of his attention on the exodus story, encouraging the reader to see it as an allegory that expresses the journey from material

enslavement to spiritual awareness. Similarly, psychiatrist Robert Rosenthal, who specializes in the interplay between psychotherapy and spirituality, suggests that we interpret the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh as representing the tension between the material and the spiritual world; Pharaoh is hopelessly earthbound, clinging to wealth, power and dominance, while Moses represents the higher ideal of breaking the bonds of attachment to the material world.<sup>145</sup>

Hairfield and Rosenthal both inspired me to look more deeply into metaphysical interpretations of the Exodus story, and when I discovered that the writings of third century Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria also looked at it through a symbolic lens, I was enchanted. Origen described the enslaved people as being “afflicted by mortar and brick,”<sup>146</sup> which symbolizes the heavy density and limitations of our physical bodies. But by the end of the journey, the people end up “watered by the waves of divine knowledge,”<sup>147</sup> which is an expression of lightness and transcendence. The spiritual quest begins when we realize that we are enslaved by identifying exclusively with the material world, and throughout our lives, we seek freedom from that state as we move toward mystical union.

Origen also speaks of a “double Exodus”<sup>148</sup> through which we leave not only our enslaved status behind, but our uninitiated selves as well. The uninitiated self is removed from the soul’s divine nature; a state of existence that Origen refers to as being “gentile,” or *an outsider*. Once we begin the journey back to divine unity, we are no longer strangers, and are welcomed back home. In the exodus story, the people spent 40 years wandering in the desert. Forty years would have been a typical lifespan at that time, and spending those years as bereft wanderers represents a lifetime of hunger and spiritual seeking, beginning with spiritual starvation, homelessness and deprivation, and traveling toward a spiritual home where sustenance awaits.

The point of this analysis is to illustrate that the story is an *allegory*, not a factual entry in the historical record. Origen teaches us to use our critical thinking and intuitive interpretation skills when reading spiritual texts. The sense of exile and desire for reunion is not a story belonging to one group of people or one point in time. It is the eternal story of humanity’s struggle to reconcile flesh and spirit.

If we take these stories literally, we deprive ourselves of the healing intention with which they were created. Strip away the literalism, and much of the toxicity will disappear with it.