

## Is God a Divine Bungler?

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**Bible Lessons: Lamentations 3:21-33 & Mark 5:21-43**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Is God a divine bungler? That might seem like an irreverent question to ask, especially coming from the pulpit. We generally assign much more positive attributes to God in our church speak, words like almighty, all knowing, all powerful, all merciful, King of the Universe, Heavenly Father, etc., etc., etc. But *bungler*? A few centuries ago, and maybe today in some parts of the country, that kind of talk could get you burned at the stake. Where did I come up with such a question?

Where I came up with that question was from our Old Testament reading from the third chapter of Lamentations that you just heard read. Let me highlight the last few verses for you:

<sup>31</sup>...the LORD will not  
reject forever.

<sup>32</sup>Although he causes grief, he will have compassion  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;

<sup>33</sup>for he does not willingly afflict  
or grieve anyone.

It could not be more clear. Verse 32 states that God causes grief. Verse 33 says that he doesn't willingly cause grief. The only conclusion I can reach is that God is either forced into grieving us, which seems unlikely for an almighty God, or He does it accidentally. Either way, this presents us with a less flattering and grandiose vision of God than we are used to dealing with. For me, ignoring little tidbits like this from scripture is not an option. Often these little surprises come to us as gifts that help us better understand not only our theology but God himself.

This is the type of thing that you might expect to find in the Old Testament book of Lamentations, a book that we aren't too familiar with in the first place. Lamentations were a type of Psalm where the writer is crying out in grief or suffering seeking answers or sometimes simply complaining about the tragedies that have befallen the children of Israel. The book of Lamentations was written around the time that the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people hauled off into captivity. The people sought an answer as to why God would let this happen to them.

To be quite frank, the psalmist does not come up with a satisfactory answer if, in fact, he comes up with an answer at all. The best he can come up with are assurances that God still loves us. “<sup>22</sup>The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases...” he says. Our response to this love is evidently to be unquestioning. He goes on...

<sup>25</sup>The LORD is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.

<sup>26</sup>It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the LORD.

<sup>27</sup>It is good for one to bear  
the yoke in youth,

<sup>28</sup>to sit alone in silence  
when the LORD has imposed it,

<sup>29</sup>to put one's mouth to the dust  
(there may yet be hope),

<sup>30</sup>to give one's cheek to the smiter,  
and be filled with insults.

Here's a summary of the psalmist's theology. Yes, you have troubles, but God didn't intend it that way. He stills loves you and will eventually straighten things out. So, in the meantime, suck it up and deal with it. There may be truth in this advice, but it falls short of being very helpful or comforting to people who are suffering. If I had just received news from the doctor that I had a life threatening disease, I might expect a little more consolation from God than “Oops! Let me see what I can do about it.” It sounds a little bit like health care rationing that we're afraid might be imposed on us if our current system is reformed. You may have to wait three months for that surgery you need.

This lamentation is reminiscent of the suffering of Job. Job was a righteous man who suffers the loss of everything which is dear to him. He and three of his friends engage God and put God to the test to justify the bad things which have happened. I know that I am oversimplifying the story but God ultimately tells Job that he isn't capable of understanding. God almost seems to be saying, “You don't know how hard it is to be me.” Job is satisfied with what God says; probably unrealistically satisfied for what most of us have experienced.

How do you respond when tragedy strikes your life for no apparent reason? How do you explain it when God let's someone take unfair advantage of you and they are allowed to go happily on with their lives? Why does God let the Bernie Madhoffs of the world rob people of their hard earned savings and retirement? Who are you going to call when you get that fatal diagnosis from your doctor or that dreaded phone call from the highway patrol in the middle of the night? Is lamentation and ranting at the silent heavens our only answer, our only consolation? If it is, I would say I don't have much to offer you here in the way of help.

About 2000 years ago, a group of the descendants of those troubled exiles who had returned from Babylon found someone who was willing to listen to their cries of suffering. The person they found to ask was an itinerant Jewish preacher, teacher and healer, Jesus of Nazareth. In today's Gospel we get a sense of the desperate response to his trying to help. Wherever he goes there are people waiting to be healed. For these people, Jesus is the answer to their questions. He has concrete power in their lives.

As soon as Jesus gets off the boat, he is besieged by a crowd demanding his attention, probably mostly demanding his help. The one who gains his attention is Jairus, the leader of the synagogue who begs him to come and lay hands on his daughter to heal her from a life threatening disease. Jesus goes with him and while he is on the way a sick woman sneaks up behind him to touch his robe in order to get healed on the sly. Do you get a sense of how desperate, numerous, and persistent these people are for help?

I can remember Sundays in the past standing up here in front of the church reading the names of five people who have died during the past week and praying for an almost endless list of people who are in the hospital and I can see your eyes almost glaze over at the magnitude of the suffering before you. We see it in the church office, particularly at the end of the month when people are running out of money people who come into the office for help because they are hungry, homeless, and helpless. I think we get a glimpse at these times of the crowds pressing around Jesus for help. But does God help? Can God help?

There was help for the woman who snuck up on Jesus for healing. Jesus sensed that she was there and turned around to confront her. She is probably scared that he is going to berate her or worse since she, polluted from a ritual standpoint by her hemorrhaging, should not have touched him. But Jesus is filled only with compassion for her and declares that her faith has healed her. It is a combination of Jesus' overwhelming compassion and the faith that are responsible for the healing.

Then, when they reach the house of Jairus, it seems that they are too late; the girl is already dead. Calmly Jesus takes the father and the mother in to the girl, touches her and she gets up. The formerly skeptical crowds are silenced and Jesus makes the mundane suggestion that they get the girl something to eat. Maybe they went out and got her some chicken soup. Interestingly, Jesus orders them not to make a big fuss about the miracle. They are to tell no one. I get the impression that this story is more about getting that bowl of soup, simple caring for another, that is more important than a heavenly miracle. Jesus' touch is just that, a loving touch.



From our reading in Lamentations to the story of Jesus healing the woman with a hemorrhage and raising the daughter of Jairus spans over 500 years. In this 500 years of biblical history we are eyewitnesses to the evolution of God among the people of Israel. We started with an abstract idea of God who rules majestically and sometimes with a mystifying power from off in heaven. He is a God whose ways we can't really understand. In the person of Jesus all those years later, we encounter a hands-on God who is not afraid to touch people and knows the importance of a hot meal when you've been sick. This is a God whose compassion and love we can see firsthand.

What about us? Another two thousand years have passed and our understanding of who God is and who Jesus Christ is has changed even further. For better or for worse we have a different understanding of how disease works. Our scientific worldview tells us that diseases are caused by viruses and bacteria and not the anger of the gods. Earthquakes are caused by the shifting of tectonic plates, not the wrath of Yahweh. When we seek healing we go to doctors who will prescribe medications, not faith healers who will lay their hands upon us. But when bad things happen, we still may cry, "Oh God, why did you do this to me."

In my own personal faith and in my own experience in seeing how other people deal with tragedy and suffering, I've learned a little bit from both of these stories that we heard today. I don't exactly know who God is, but I don't think that God is a divine bungler. There is something to be learned from Job's experience that there are things we can't now and will never understand. I continue to appreciate Lamentations. Sometimes it really does help to just shout out in exasperation at God or the universe. Ahhhhhh!!! And there is value in just sitting silently and waiting on God's answer. Often time does heal our wounds, miraculously I might say.

From the woman with the hemorrhage I have learned the power of faith and hope. I know that sometimes I have to take things into my own hands and pursue Jesus through the crowd just to grasp at the hem of his garment. I'm not exactly sure what that means, but when I'm desperate enough I may find out. And I may be healed. I've seen it happen to others.

From Jesus, I learned the power of compassion. I learned that even when I feel put upon by all the world's troubles, when people are grabbing at me from behind that it may be just time to turn around and smile. I can't perform any miracles, but I can allow someone to touch me, to get close. I can touch someone in return and maybe they will feel comforted. I even know how to make a bowl of homemade chicken and noodle soup, I mean with homemade noodles. Maybe those things **are** real miracles.

Let me perfectly frank with you for a moment. In the course of my study of scripture and in my experience of life, I sometimes feel that I have gotten to know God better. But there are moments in life, often in the middle of the night, that I feel that I don't know

God at all. The disturbing times are not when I am angry at God, but when I feel the total absence of God. There are times when I am tired of waiting for God to make things right in this world. At those times I wish that God was a divine bungler; at least then I would have some sense of what God's all about. But maybe that's just me.

Here's my answer for those dark moments. It comes from the writings of St. Augustine. Please join me as we use his words as a prayer:

“Who [God] will grant it to me to find peace in you? Who will grant me this grace, that you should come into my heart and inebriate it, enabling me to forget the evils that beset me and embrace you, my only good? What are you to me? Have mercy on me, so that I may tell. What indeed am I to you, that you should command me to love you, and grow angry with me if I do not, and threaten me with enormous woes? Is not the failure to love you woe enough in itself? You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

Amen.