



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

When Bad Things Happen – Where Is God?

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W. Burney Overton

The storm strikes. A bolt crashes out of the blue. Whether they be natural, or the product of the actions of human beings, bad things happen. People suffer and die. The cry goes out – or up – Why? Where is God? Why doesn't He do something about pain and suffering? Why doesn't He intervene and keep bad things from happening?

Yet, bad things do happen. Why they happen is a mystery, although generations have sought the answer. Those who believe in God question His goodness and love when bad things happen. It seems as if God ought to use His power to protect people – to see that people do not suffer and die. It is especially difficult to understand why people who are responsive to God and trying to do the right things in their lives should experience hardship and pain and suffering. Why doesn't God use His power to prevent, or to relieve, or to restore? Where is God when bad things happen?

As I listen to people wrestling with these questions, I note that the underlying point of view seems to be that there is reward for right living, and punishment for wrong.

On the one hand, there is the man who has worked hard all his life. He is a man of faith. He is active in the church. He is honest and straightforward in all his relationships. He is charitable, and kindly, and loving toward his family and friends. He is thoroughly dependable and fair in every aspect of his life. He is a good man, and known to be. If anyone deserves to receive rewards, he does.

And yet, one of his children commits suicide. His wife is chronically ill and will only get worse. He himself has had a mild heart attack. And recently, he was told that his job was to be terminated after he had worked for the company twenty-seven years. His life seems to be coming apart. Nothing is working out. There appear to be no rewards. Where Is God? What about the man's faithfulness? Is there no justice, nor fairness in this life?

On the other hand, there is the man who has been a ne'er-do-well all his life. He has shifted from job to job, never being dependable enough to hold a position for any length of time. His wife has worked all their married life and managed to keep the family together. When he could get his hands on her money, he wasted it as he did his own. One day, he bought a lottery ticket – and it was the winning number, with the largest prize ever awarded. Even with his wasteful ways, there was enough money to provide for him and his family the rest of their lives.

Is there neither justice, nor fairness in this life? Where is God?

It seems to me that the problem lies in the point of view. The context of earning, and reward, and punishment is the wrong context for trying to understand God's role in the things that happen in people's lives. In order to understand, I need another point of view.

I see God to be "The One Who Is" Who is the Creator of all things. I believe that He has created human beings in His Own Image, and that He loves that Creation with an

absolutely limitless love. Not only is He a God who loves unconditionally, but also he is a very wise God. He sees all his Creation as good. With limitless love and wisdom, He exercises His power in that which he has created.

It seems obvious to me that, since God has the power to create all things, He has the power to intercede and to change what happens, or keep it from happening. And He does not. Why not? Why does He choose not to intercede or to change what happens? Does He never intercede? If He never does, or if He does only under certain circumstances, how does that show limitless love and wisdom?

These and many other questions keep begging for answers. In a context of earning and reward and punishment, any answers offered seem only to cloud the issue further.

What happens if God is an intervening God? Especially if, in human experience, the intervention is selective and more in response to the pleading of persons than to the need for intervention.

Then God appears to be arbitrary, and capricious, and not very loving except toward those on whose behalf He has chosen to intervene.

A baby girl, not yet a year old, has an incurable liver disease and will die before her first birthday if she cannot have a liver transplant. Medical science has come a long way. Now her life can be saved if a donor can be found. The family, desperate for her to live, does all they know to do to make it possible. They pray. Their friends pray. As the situation becomes known, even strangers pray. There is publicity and nationwide appeals for a donor.

Almost out of the blue, it seems, a donor is found. A tiny child, not much older than the baby girl, was killed in an automobile accident. His head was crushed, but the body organs were undamaged. His parents wanted some good to come from the tragedy in their family, so they agreed for his organs to be donated, and the baby girl received his liver.

The operation was performed. The child survived. She was able to come home for her first birthday, and her life expectancy is normal.

Did God intervene? Did God cause it to happen? Did God make it possible for the baby girl to have a normal life at the expense of death to the little boy, with life-long loss and grief for his family? What potential for significant contribution to the world did the little boy have? Did God choose that one child should live and not the other? That one family should be favored and the other deprived?

Who was rewarded? For what? Who was punished and for what? What kind of God – or person – having the power to intervene and change what happens, would reward, or punish, in such a way and at such a cost to those involved?

Where is love in that sequence of events? Bad things do happen. Good things do happen. Where is God? I need another context than the reward and punishment one if I am to find any answers, or be at peace in my relationship with God.

For me, God is very much involved in His creation, and in the affairs of people. He is unconditional in His love, and perfect in His wisdom. He is loving enough, and wise enough not to intervene in ways that deny that people are in the image of God. They are more than puppets, or pawns to be pushed around the chess board of life. They are in the image of a Creator who loves unconditionally and is very wise. In that image, they also have the capacity to love unconditionally and to be very wise in human relationships.

God grieves, suffers, and is distressed when bad things happen. He is there to support and comfort and guide at those times. He is there with all His power, available to people as they cope with the bad things that happen. If, and when, He intervenes, it is in ways that preserve the personhood of His people, and God does not add pain and suffering to others.

Since I am created in the image of God, I have the power and capacity to make decisions. In fact, I do not have the option not to make them. If I live at all, I make decisions. The outcome of my deciding is that bad things can and do happen. So do good things. As I look back over the experiences of my life, I realize that strength and fulfillment have come in my struggle to cope both with good and with bad things that happen. I get caught up in the issue of the objective of life. What is it all about anyway?

Life and death are realities. I live a number of years and I die. But much more is involved than the physical life span – short or long though it may be. Much more is involved than that life shall be free of suffering and pain. Much more than that bad things shall not happen, or that people are rewarded for their good works and punished for their bad.

The objective of my life is to be faithful in my response to being loved unconditionally. I want to strive toward expressing unconditional love. I want to try to be wise as my Creator is wise. I want to work at building trust and acceptance and caring in all my relationships. I want to find the strength to cope constructively in all aspects of my life.

This life is temporal. This life is incomplete. The quality of this life is dependent on the decisions of people and the outcome of those decisions. All that can be has not yet been experienced. In this life, bad things do happen.

Bad things happen because people make decisions and act on them. There are consequences.

Bad things happen just because our world is as it is. There are storms and

pestilences. The earth shakes. Nature acts out, and suffering and death result. Things just happen. No human has made a decision that they are to take place.

Bad things happen because of incompleteness and unfinishedness. It appears that the world and the people who populate it are not yet what they shall be. I was very incomplete and undeveloped when I started my life. The potential was all there, but I was a helpless bundle. I couldn't do anything for myself, much less anyone else. It was a struggle to learn to turn over. There were many a bump and bruise when I was learning to walk. Through all kinds of trials and testings, I grew and learned and became more proficient. I also made mistakes. I broke things. I hurt people. I made unwise decisions. Bad things happen. I was – still am – incomplete and unfinished.

I freely acknowledge that I do not fully understand the wisdom of God in creating it all that way. I wish that there were not suffering and hardship. I wish bad things didn't happen but can't envision a way for it to be that would be any better. In fact, when I try to think along those lines, everything I can envision would be worse.

I believe God is always "there" in all the events of life. I believe that He is wise enough, and loving enough not to set His created order aside. I believe that he cares too much for His creation in His own image to do that.

I don't want bad things to happen to me. Nor do I want the kind of life where there is no risk of bad things happening. I don't want God to be so protective of me that bad things are prevented from happening.

When they are happening, and I am really hurting, I wish that God – or somebody – or something would intervene and make it stop. I wish for the intervention until I am able to think about what kind of life we would have if God did so function.

Of course God intervenes, but not in ways that make human beings less than the creations they are by His Grace.

I love my children very much. It was and is my desire to be a wise parent. They are all grown now, and parents themselves. I am interested in everything that goes on with them. Sometimes, in the way that they decide about and live their lives, there is the potential for bad things to happen. Sometimes bad things happen anyway. When they do, I wish that I could intervene and fix it for them. Sometimes I could – by taking over and saying to them, "This is how it is going to be." Sometimes, they might even thank me for doing so in a particular situation. But mostly not. They like my interest. They appreciate my support. They value my wisdom. They like for me to be involved.

But they don't want me to take their responsibility and their personhood away from them. They don't want me to function in ways that keep them from growing and experiencing their own life. They want me to love them enough to leave them free, even while I am with them in their experiencing of life.

That I can do. If I, a human being, can see with that degree of wisdom and love, then God, my Creator, sees with greater wisdom and love.

When bad things happen, God is there. He cares. He uses His power. He does not take over and fix it all for me. He honors my power and my wisdom and my capacity to cope. He loves me too much to take my personhood away from me. He loves me too much to turn me into a puppet or a pawn. He loves me enough to be with me when I suffer and hurt, and to be my strength as I struggle and grow and become what He has created me to be.

I could ask for no greater love.