

“Whose is Death?”

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I used to think I knew all the answers. I used to think God controlled what went on in the world. Everything that happened had a ‘purpose’ and was part of His ‘plan’. He rewarded the righteous and punished the wicked. Things happened because God intended them to happen. If it wasn’t obvious to me, it must be ‘wisdom in Him’, and I would understand someday. But I also became increasingly uncomfortable with paradox.

I was very close to my grandparents, having lived with them during many childhood summers when my parents wanted my brother and me to escape from suburbia and be around farms and gardens, cousins and mentoring grandparents. I clearly recall my grief at the passing (within a year) of my two grandfathers, and my shock when well-intended people attempted to console me with the notion that this is what God intended, and that He needed them now. Did God really need them more than I or their widows did?

Following my mission to Taiwan, I graduated in engineering at the U and from the Salt Lake Institute of Religion. My new bride and I then moved to Golden, Colorado for my doctoral study in Materials Science. I befriended a Chinese couple in my department. A tragic winter-ice auto accident soon killed the young wife and maimed the young husband. I visited the young man in the hospital, where he was in traction, and witnessed his grief at the loss of his bride, and his anger that he had not shared her fate. I was completely at a loss to understand ‘why’ this had happened, and felt utterly helpless as a friend to try to explain my feelings, let alone assist in consoling him. I was unable to defend God—if indeed it was God—who had apparently required this sacrifice from the young man. Later, at the young woman's open memorial service, my confusion was so profound, and I was so startled at my lack of understanding, that I was unable to speak, nor again, console.

I happened upon a small book that served the Spirit in answering my desperate prayers, Rabbi Harold Kushner's When Bad Things Happen to Good People. When filtered through the gospel paradigm, this book conveyed many powerful eternal truths to my soul, which were confirmed by the Spirit and which beautifully complemented the many truths found in the Book of Mormon. These included key aspects of the nature of agency and the nature of God, as seen through the lens of the inspired author of the book of Job: God did not will or manipulate the death of this young lady, nor even the deaths of my beloved grandfathers I had grieved for and wondered about, so many years earlier.

About ten years later, I chanced to meet an old college roommate as we were both waiting to board the same plane. I had been a pre-mission freshman, and Jim was a newly returned missionary at the time. The plane was mostly empty now, so we got to sit together on the flight and catch up on the nearly 20-year lag since our last conversation. Jim had become inactive, and he told me about a tragic situation that had caused his best friend and former mission companion to become atheist: His friend Dave and his bride had gone through a difficult pregnancy, of which the last three months were spent in a hospital mental ward where she had no recognition of any family. I am unfamiliar with the condition, but the young mother recovered following the

birth. The child was named after Dave's best friend (my ex-roommate) James. Tragically, after one week of life the child suffered a complication that destroyed all intellectual capacity, leaving the infant a complete vegetable. They took the infant home on Christmas Eve, having been told they should prepare for him to die within a day. Over nine years later, the child still lived, but in the same mental condition as the day they brought him home. Of the many questions asked, each was a variation on the theme "Why?" "My best friend would neither have done this to me, nor permitted it to happen if it was within his power to prevent it—so why would God?" "Either there is no god, or if this is what he is like, then I do not want to know him."

Later, Brother and Sister Anderson were leaving from our ward to be missionaries at the Martin's Cove Visitor's Center. I had personally experienced the spirit of that sacred place the year before, and paid rapt attention at this sacrament service when they spoke. Sister Anderson's talk was especially insightful and I was deeply touched. She spoke about how she thought she had known "all the answers". Then came a rash of calamity in the form of death, disease and health-related tragedy to three close members of her family, with much accompanying long-term suffering. I had been coming to the conclusion myself that God does not cause suffering to come upon us, but that He *allows* it—to see what we will do with it—as an important part of our mortal experience. I learned from Sister Anderson that it is even more than this. Suffering can lead us to Christ if we come before Him in humility and permit Him to lighten our burdens. What a beautiful testimony to take with her to such a place as Martin's Cove, where we celebrate the divine hand of comfort and guided, dramatic rescue from needless suffering!

After a short period, I met Chris, my Irish boss, at a professional conference in Ireland, and then accompanied him to Sweden on a business trip. We had several informal lunch discussions of the trials he experienced during the preceding five years when his parents were afflicted greatly by poor health, then died tragically within a year of each other. Chris had taken a one-year leave of absence and gone soul-searching in the heart of India. He was 38, brought up Protestant. "Kind of shakes your faith, doesn't it?" was his comment. We discussed how that perspective was based upon the assumption that God had somehow caused (or was complicit by refusing to prevent) his parent's suffering and death, for some reason best known to Himself. I explained that my faith was unshaken since this was not the nature of the God I believed in. I gave him a Book of Mormon and pointed him to Alma 40-42; then he ran to catch his plane. I was left to my own devices until my flight the following morning, and so drove to Copenhagen to pass the full day before my flight home....

...Feeling I had failed my friend Jim in our earlier plane conversation and feeling a deep responsibility to the Gospel understanding I possessed, I desperately wanted to compose my pressing thoughts and feelings of testimony into a concise form I could now share with my Irish friend Chris. Taking a pen, some scraps of paper, and a water bottle, I prayerfully left the hotel and wandered the streets of Copenhagen to stir thoughts. Every street brought new sensations of sight, sound and smell that seemed to be magnified by the Spirit that burned inside me. But the truly profound experience came from discerning the spirits of each of my Danish brothers and sisters with whom I made eye contact and shared a smile. Each new face I looked into contained a story—a unique set of trials and suffering, triumph and success. I again pondered mortality, and the terrible costs inherent in the loss of life—the loss of these lives, or the loss of any life... agency as an ability to decide and act for oneself... the fact that man's agency is

God's will... and that God, having freely given agency, is bound by justice not to manipulate... agency triggering justice... death as forfeiture of agency... the very real possibility of failure as a required aspect of agency... "the fall" as the focal point for scriptural and temple accounts establishing need for redemption...

I pondered the cornerstone of Christendom as the redemptive death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus to overcome the effects of the fall. This led to more thoughts flooding into my mind as I prayerfully searched for the connections: the nature of God, the nature of agency, disobedience to the stated will of God, and the resulting experience of failure, are all inextricably connected in the events of the Garden. While the will of the Father is clearly stated and is a constant, the urgent cunning of the great deceiver and the self-justifications of Eve and then Adam in obeying Lucifer in preference to God are all critical to sort out.

A distinct phrase came clearly into my mind, borne by the Spirit: "*Death is not God's.*"

As I wandered among the faces of brothers and sisters in the streets of Copenhagen, the meditative pondering started to gel together in a contrast of *yin* and *yang*. Back at the hotel, it was easy to concentrate on the various thoughts and impressions of the day, piecing together a composition. The same activity made short the airplane journey home. My friend Chris was deeply touched and very grateful when I shared my testimony—the resultant poetic meditation—with him.

Now as I consider what is really important in life, I think that knowing the answers is of far less consequence than asking well-founded questions...