

## **When Bad Things Happen to Good People – Summary Text**

By Harold S. Kushner (1981)--notes by Doug Muder (1997)

[Introduction, Why I wrote this book.](#) Kushner wrote this book as a reaction to personal tragedy--his son Aaron had premature aging, which he died from. This provoked a crisis of faith for Kushner, who is a rabbi. He wrote this book for people "who have been hurt by life", to help them find a faith that can aid in getting through their troubles, rather than making things worse.

1. [Why do the righteous suffer?](#) A summary of all the too-easy answers to the question of human suffering, and why they are inadequate.
2. [The story of a man named Job.](#) Kushner presents his theological framework in the form of a re-interpretation of the story of Job. He lets go of the notion that God is all-powerful in favor of the notion that God is good.

The next four chapters flesh out Kushner's basic ideas by looking at three different causes of human suffering. In each case he takes the position that God does not cause the suffering and could not prevent it.

3. [Sometimes there is no reason.](#) This chapter covers random, circumstantial suffering, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Kushner attributes the orderliness of the universe to God, but holds that the ordering of the universe is not complete: Some things are just circumstantial, and there is no point in looking for a reason for them.

4. [No exceptions for nice people.](#) Some suffering is caused by the workings of natural law. There is no moral judgment involved--natural law is blind, and God does not interfere with it. God does not intervene to save good people from earthquake or disease, and does not send these misfortunes to punish the wicked. Kushner puts great value on the orderliness of the universe's natural law, and would not want God to routinely intervene for moral reasons.

5. [God leaves us room to be human.](#) Some suffering is caused by the actions of evil people. Kushner re-interprets the story of Adam and Eve to make the point that the ability to choose between good and evil is what makes us human. For God to interfere with our ability to do evil would make all of us less human.

6. [God helps those who stop hurting themselves.](#) Some suffering we cause ourselves by the way we handle our initial suffering. We blame ourselves, or we take out our anger on the people who are trying to help us, or on God.

7. [God can't do everything, but he can do some important things.](#) If God didn't cause our problems and can't fix them, why pray? Two reasons: The prayers of others can make us aware that we are not facing our problems alone. And God can give us the strength of character that we need to handle our misfortunes, if we are willing to accept it.

8. [What good, then, is religion?](#) Chapter 7 already answered this question. What this chapter really does is wrap up: "Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people? That depends on what we mean by 'answer'. If we mean 'Is there an explanation which will make sense of it all?'... then there probably is no satisfying answer. We can offer learned explanations, but in the end, when we have covered all the squares on the game board and are feeling very proud of our cleverness, the pain and the anguish and the sense of unfairness will still be there. But the word 'answer' can also mean 'response' as well as 'explanation,' and in that sense, there may well be a satisfying answer to the tragedies in our lives. The response would be Job's response in MacLeish's version of the biblical story—to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to the people around us, and to go on living despite it all." [page 147]

# Themes in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

I find three basic overlapping questions in this book:

## **What should you do or say when someone you care about faces tragedy?**

"It is hard to know what to say to a person who has been struck by tragedy, but it is easier to know what not to say. Anything critical of the mourner ('don't take it so hard,' 'try to hold back your tears, you're upsetting people') is wrong. Anything which tries to minimize the mourner's pain ('it's probably for the best,' 'it could be a lot worse,' 'she's better off now') is likely to be misguided and unappreciated. Anything which asks the mourner to disguise or reject his feelings ('we have no right to question God,' 'God must love you to have selected you for this burden') is wrong as well." [page 89]

"I said to Barry, as I feel religious people should say to those who have been hurt by life, 'This was not your fault. You are a good, decent person who deserves better. I can understand that you feel hurt, confused, angry at what happened, but there is no reason why you should feel guilty. As a man of faith, I have come to you in God's name, not to judge you, but to help you. Will you let me help you?'" [page 104]

## **How should you think about and react to the tragedy in your own life?**

"Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people? That depends on what we mean by 'answer'. If we mean 'Is there an explanation which will make sense of it all?'... then there probably is no satisfying answer. We can offer learned explanations, but in the end, when we have covered all the squares on the game board and are feeling very proud of our cleverness, the pain and the anguish and the sense of unfairness will still be there. But the word 'answer' can also mean 'response' as well as 'explanation,' and in that sense, there may well be a satisfying answer to the tragedies in our lives. The response would be Job's response in MacLeish's version of the biblical story-to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to the people around us, and to go on living despite it all." [page 147]

"What do we do with our anger when we have been hurt? The goal, if we can achieve it, would be to be angry at the situation, rather than at ourselves, or at those who might have prevented it or are close to us trying to help us, or at God who let it happen. Getting angry at ourselves makes us depressed. Being angry at other people scares them away and makes it harder for them to help us. Being angry at God erects a barrier between us and all the sustaining, comforting resources of religion that are there to help us at such times. But being angry at the situation, recognizing it as something rotten, unfair, and totally undeserved, shouting about it, denouncing it crying over it, permits us to discharge the anger which is a part of being hurt, without making it harder for us to be helped." [pages 108-109]

"All we can do is try to rise beyond the question 'why did it happen?' and begin to ask the question 'what do I do now that it has happened?'" [page 71]

### **What kind of God can we believe in when bad things can happen to good people?**

"Let me suggest that the author of the Book of Job takes the position which neither Job nor his friends take. He believes in God's goodness and in Job's goodness, and is prepared to give up his belief in proposition (A): that God is all-powerful." [page 42]

"If God is God of justice and not of power, then He can still be on our side when bad things happen to us. He can know that we are good and honest people who deserve better. Our misfortunes are none of His doing, and so we can turn to Him for help." [page 44]

"The God I believe in doesn't send us the problem; He gives us the strength to cope with the problem." [page 127]

"The conventional explanation, that God sends us the burden because He knows that we are strong enough to handle it, has it all wrong. Fate, not God, sends us the problem. When we try to deal with it, we find out that we are not strong. We are weak; we get tired, we get angry, overwhelmed. We begin to wonder how we will ever make it through all the years. But when we reach the limits of our own strength and courage, something unexpected happens. We find reinforcement coming from a source outside ourselves. And in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God is on our side, we manage to go on." [page 129]

Kushner reveals a lot about himself in this book, perhaps more than he realizes. Watching his son Aaron die of premature aging caused him to realize that he could not continue to believe all the things he had been taught about God, about himself, and about the nature of the world. He would have to jettison some of his beliefs in order to save others. The choices he made are very revealing.

[The world has a moral order](#) - For Kushner, the most important thing to continue to believe about the world is that it is orderly, and in particular that it has a moral order. He is willing to acknowledge that some chaos and randomness exists in the world, but he labels it as evil.

[God is good](#) - God's most important role is as the source of the world's moral order. And more than that, God Himself must exemplify the moral order.

[Anger is justified](#) - One of the most striking things to me in this book is how important Kushner's anger is to him. Kushner is angry at what he sees as the unfairness of life, and his anger is so important that even God cannot remain neutral in the face of it. If God cannot share Kushner's anger, then Kushner will be angry at God.

## **When Bad Things Happen to Good People – Full Text**

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Introduction, Why I wrote this book. Kushner wrote this book as a reaction to personal tragedy--his son Aaron had premature aging, which he died from. This provoked a crisis of faith for Kushner, who is a rabbi. He wrote this book for people "who have been hurt by life", to help them find a faith that can aid in getting through their troubles, rather than making things worse.

### **1. Why do the righteous suffer?**

*A summary of all the too-easy answers to the question of human suffering, and why they are inadequate.*

"It is tempting at one level to believe that bad things happen to people (especially other people) because God is a righteous judge who gives them what they deserve. By believing that, we keep the world orderly and understandable." [page 9]

"It was hard [for the woman in Kushner's example] to live with multiple sclerosis, but it was even harder to live with the idea that things happened to people for no reason, that God had lost touch with the world and nobody was in the driver's seat." [page 16]

Kushner outlines the various ways that people try to salvage their view of God and His orderly world. They explain that misfortune occurs because

1. Someone made a mistake, or failed in the observance of some religious duty.
2. God has a hidden purpose, or is making use of knowledge we don't have.
3. Suffering itself will turn out to be good for us.
4. God's purpose is in the grand design of the Universe (which is good and beautiful), not in the life of the individual.
5. Suffering teaches something, either to us or to those who see us suffer.
6. Suffering is a test.
7. Death leads us and our loved ones to a better place.

Kushner rejects all of these explanations.

"All the responses to tragedy which we have considered have at least one thing in common. They all assume that God is the cause of our suffering, and they try to understand why God would want us to suffer. ... There may be another approach. Maybe God does not cause our suffering. Maybe it happens for some reason other than the will of God." [page 29]

## **2. The story of a man named Job.**

*Kushner presents his theological framework in the form of a re-interpretation of the story of Job. He lets go of the notion that God is all-powerful in favor of the notion that God is good.*

Summary of Job: Job was a fortunate and pious man. Satan charges that Job is pious only because he is fortunate. To prove a point, God lets Satan take away all that Job has, including his children, and to cover his body with boils. Three friends come to visit Job, and their conversations are the bulk of the book. Job complains that his suffering is an injustice from God. His friends defend the idea that God is just with a variety of arguments, including that Job must have done something to deserve his suffering. Job declares his innocence and challenges God to be his accuser. God appears in a whirlwind and points out that He and Job are not equals. Job is silenced. God then reproves Job's friends and restores Job's health and fortune.

"To try to understand the book and its answer, let us take note of three statements which everyone in the book, and most of the readers, would like to be able to believe:

- A. God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens in the world. Nothing happens without His will it.
- B. God is just and fair, and stands for people getting what they deserve, so that the good prosper and the wicked are punished.
- C. Job is a good person.

As long as Job is healthy and wealthy, we can believe all three of those statements at the same time with no difficulty. When Job suffers, when he loses his possessions, his family and his health, we have a problem. We can no longer make sense of all three propositions together. We can now affirm any two only by denying the third.

If God is both just and powerful, then Job must be a sinner who deserves what is happening to him. If Job is good but God causes his suffering anyway, then God is not just. If Job deserved better and God did not send his suffering, then God is not all-powerful....Job's friends are prepared to stop believing in (C), the assertion that Job is a good person. ...Job's solution is to reject proposition (B), the affirmation of God's goodness. Job is in fact a good man, but God is so powerful that He is not limited by considerations of fairness and justice. ... Let me suggest that the author of the Book of Job takes the position which neither Job nor his friends take. He believes in God's goodness and in Job's goodness, and is prepared to give up his belief in proposition (A): that God is all-powerful." [pages 37-42]

"I take these lines [from God's speech at the end of Job] to mean 'if you think that it is so easy to keep the world straight and true, to keep unfair things from happening to people, *you* try it.' God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even He can't bring that about. It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims. But could man, without God, do it better?" [page 43]

I have to point out that this is a most unusual reading of Job, and I don't see much support for it in the text, in which God very explicitly gives Satan license to persecute Job. I would claim that the position of the author of Job is not much different from the position Kushner ascribes to the character Job. Kushner comments on this view:

"That is to say that the morality of the Bible, with its stress on human virtue and the sanctity of human life, is irrelevant to God, and that charity, justice and the dignity of the individual human being have some source other than God. If that were true, many of us would be tempted to leave God, and seek out and worship that source of charity, justice, and human dignity instead." [page 42]

"If God is God of justice and not of power, the He can still be on our side when bad things happen to us. He can know that we are good and honest people who deserve better. Our misfortunes are none of His doing, and so we can turn to Him for help. ... We will turn to God, not to be judged or forgiven, but to be strengthened and comforted." [page 44]

"We can be angry at what has happened to us, without feeling that we are angry at God. More than that, we can recognize our anger at life's unfairness, our instinctive compassion at seeing people suffer, as coming from God who teaches us to be angry at injustice and to feel compassion for the afflicted. Instead of feeling that we are opposed to God, we can feel that our indignation is God's anger at unfairness working through us, that when we cry out, we are still on God's side, and He is still on ours." [page 45]

### **3. Sometimes there is no reason.**

*This chapter covers random, circumstantial suffering, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Kushner attributes the orderliness of the universe to God, but holds that the ordering of the universe is not complete: Some things are just circumstantial, and there is no point in looking for a reason for them.*

"Can you accept the idea that some things happen for no reason, that there is randomness in the universe?" [page 46]

"The world is mostly an orderly, predictable place, showing ample evidence of God's thoroughness and handiwork, but pockets of chaos remain. Most of the time, the events of the universe follow firm natural laws. But every now and then, things happen not contrary to those laws of nature but outside them. Things happen which could just as easily have happened differently." [page 52]

"An engine bolt breaks on flight 205 instead of on flight 209, inflicting tragedy on one random group of families rather than another. There is no message in all of that. There is no reason for those particular people to be afflicted rather than others. These events do not reflect God's choices. They happen at random, and randomness is another name for chaos, in those corners of the universe where God's creative light has not yet penetrated. And chaos is evil; not wrong, not malevolent, but evil nonetheless, because by causing tragedies at random, it prevents people from believing in God's goodness." [page 53]

"A system *left to itself* may evolve in the direction of randomness [as thermodynamics says]. On the other hand, our world may not be a system left to itself. There may in fact be a creative impulse acting on it, the Spirit of God hovering over the dark waters, operating over the course of millennia to bring order out of the chaos. It may yet come to pass that, as 'Friday afternoon' of the world's evolution ticks toward the Great Sabbath which is the End of Days, the impact of random evil will be diminished. Or it may be that God finished His work of creating eons ago, and left the rest to us. ... In that case, we will simply have to learn to live with it, sustained and comforted by the knowledge that the earthquake and the accident, like the murder and the robbery, are not the will of God, but represent that aspect of reality which stands independent of His will, and which angers and saddens God even as it angers and saddens us." [page 55]

#### **4. No exceptions for nice people.**

*Some suffering is caused by the workings of natural law. There is no moral judgment involved--natural law is blind, and God does not interfere with it. God does not intervene to save good people from earthquake or disease, and does not send these misfortunes to punish the wicked. Kushner puts great value on the orderliness of the universe's natural law, and would not want God to routinely intervene for moral reasons.*

"Centuries ago, people found reassuring proof of God in stories of miracles. ... The point of all these stories was to prove that God cared about us so much that He was willing to suspend the laws of nature to support and protect those whom He favored. But we today ... are told those stories and we are skeptical. If anything, we find proof of God precisely in the fact that laws of nature do not change. ... One of the things that makes the world livable is the fact that the laws of nature are precise and reliable, and always work the same way." [page 56-57]

"Laws of nature do not make exceptions for nice people. A bullet has no conscience; neither does a malignant tumor or an automobile gone out of control. That is why good people get sick and get hurt as much as anyone. No matter what stories we were taught about Daniel or Jonah in Sunday School, God does not reach down to interrupt the workings of laws of nature to protect the righteous from harm. This is a second area of our world which causes bad things to happen to good people, and God does not cause it and cannot stop it." [page 58]

"Nature is morally blind, without values. It churns along, following its own laws, not caring who or what gets in the way. But God is not morally blind. I could not worship Him if I thought He was. God stands for justice, for fairness, for compassion. For me, the earthquake is not an 'act of God.' The act of God is the courage of people to rebuild their lives after the earthquake, and the rush of others to help them in whatever way they can." [page 59-60]

"Instead of asking why good people have to suffer from the same laws of nature that bad people do, let us ask why any people have to suffer at all. ... If God was designing a world for our maximum benefit, why could He not create unchanging laws of nature which would not do harm to any of us, good or bad?" [page 61]



Kushner doesn't really answer this question, and acknowledges as much. He discusses some of the particular manifestations of harm, like pain and death, and points out that they are necessary for our world to work right--people without pain wouldn't know what to avoid, and a world without death would soon be overcrowded. But he attempts no answer to the question the why God couldn't have created a world where pain and death weren't necessary.

"But, as in our previous discussion of pain, we have to acknowledge that it is one thing to explain that mortality in general is good for people in general. It is something else again to try to tell someone who has lost a parent, a wife, or a child, that death is good. We don't dare try to do that. It would be cruel and thoughtless." [page 71]

Buried in the middle of this chapter is the point at which Kushner begins to change the focus of the book: "Pain is the price we pay for being alive. ... When we understand that, our question will change from, 'why do we have to be in pain?' to 'what do we do with our pain so that it becomes meaningful and is not just pointless empty suffering? How can we turn all the painful experiences of our lives into birth pangs or into growing pains?' We may not ever understand why we suffer or be able to control the forces that cause our suffering, but we can have a lot to say about what the suffering does to us, and what sort of people we become because of it. Pain makes some people bitter and envious. It makes others sensitive and compassionate. It is the result, not the cause, of pain that makes some experiences of pain meaningful and others empty and destructive." [page 64]

He returns to this point to close the chapter: "All we can do is try to rise beyond the question 'why did it happen?' and begin to ask the question 'what do I do now that it has happened?'" [page 71]

### **5. God leaves us room to be human.**

*Some suffering is caused by the actions of evil people. Kushner re-interprets the story of Adam and Eve to make the point that the ability to choose between good and evil is what makes us human. For God to interfere with our ability to do evil would make all of us less human.*

"I think there is more to the story [of Adam and Eve] than a simple case of disobeying God and being punished for it. My interpretation may be very different from the ones you have grown up with, but I think it makes sense and fits the biblical context. I think the story is about the differences between being human and being an animal. And the key to understanding it is the fact that the 'forbidden' tree is called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil." [pages 74-75]

"This, then is what happened to Adam and Eve. They became human. They had to leave the Garden of Eden, where animals eat from the Tree of Life, the tree of basic life-forces and instincts. They entered the world of the knowledge of good and evil, a more painful, more complicated world, where they would have to make difficult moral choices." [page 78]

"This is what it means to be human 'in the image of God.' It means being free to make choices instead of doing whatever our instincts would tell us to do. It means knowing that some choices are good, and others are bad, and it is our job to know the difference.... But if Man is truly free to choose, if he can show himself as being virtuous by freely choosing the good when the bad is equally possible, then he has to be free to choose the bad also. If he were only free to do good, he would not really be choosing. If we are *bound* to do good, then we are not free to *choose* it." [page 79]

"Why, then, do bad things happen to good people? One reason is that our being human leaves us free to hurt each other, and God can't stop us without taking away the freedom that makes us human. Human beings can cheat each other, rob each other, hurt each other, and God can only look down in pity and compassion at how little we have learned over the ages about how human beings should behave." [page 81]

"When people ask 'Where was God in Auschwitz? How could he have allowed the Nazis to kill so many innocent men, women, and children?', my response is that it was not God who caused it. It was caused by human beings choosing to be cruel to their fellow man." [page 81]

"I have to believe that the Holocaust was at least as much of an offense to God's moral order as it is to mine, or how can I respect God as a source of moral guidance? ... I have to believe that the tears and prayers of the victims aroused God's compassion, but having given Man freedom to choose, including the freedom to choose to hurt his neighbor, there was nothing God could do to prevent it." [pages 82-85]

#### **6. God helps those who stop hurting themselves.**

*Some suffering we cause ourselves by the way we handle our initial suffering. We blame ourselves, or we take out our anger on the people who are trying to help us, or on God.*

"One of the worst things that happens to a person who has been hurt by life is that he tends to compound the damage by hurting himself a second time. Not only is he the victim of rejection, bereavement, injury, or bad luck; he often feels the need to see himself as a bad person who had this coming to him, and because of that drives away people who try to come close to him and help him. Too often, in our pain and confusion, we instinctively do the wrong thing. We don't feel we deserve to be helped, so we let guilt, anger, jealousy, and self-imposed loneliness make a bad situation even worse. ... Too often we inadvertently find ourselves saying to people who have been hurt that they, in some way, deserved it. And when we do that, we feed into their latent sense of guilt, the suspicion that maybe this happened to them because they did somehow have it coming." [pages 87-88]

"It is hard to know what to say to a person who has been struck by tragedy, but it is easier to know what not to say. Anything critical of the mourner ('don't take it so hard,' 'try to hold back your tears, you're upsetting people') is wrong. Anything which tries to minimize the mourner's pain ('it's probably for the best,' 'it could be a lot worse,' 'she's better off now') is likely to be misguided and unappreciated. Anything which asks the

mourner to disguise or reject his feelings ('we have no right to question God,' 'God must love you to have selected you for this burden') is wrong as well." [page 89]

"Job's friends did do at least two things right, though. First of all, they came. ... And secondly, they listened." [page 90]

"When things don't turn out as we would like them to, it is very tempting to assume that had we done things differently, the story would have had a happier ending. ... There seem to be two elements involved in our readiness to feel guilt. The first is our strenuous need to believe that the world makes sense, that there is a cause for every effect and a reason for everything that happens. ... The second element is the notion that *we* are the cause of what happens, especially the bad things that happen. It seems to be a short step from believing that every event has a cause to believing that every disaster is our fault." [page 92]

"Even more than adults, children tend to see themselves as the center of their world, and to believe that their acts make things happen. They need a lot of reassurance that when a parent dies, they did not cause it. ... Children need to be assured that the parent who died did not reject them or *choose* to leave them. ... To try to make a child feel better by telling him how beautiful it is in heaven and how happy his father is to be with God is another way of depriving him of the chance to grieve. When we do that, we ask a child to deny and mistrust his own feelings, to be happy when he really wants to be sad even as all of us around him are sad. The child's right to feel upset and angry, and the appropriateness of her being angry at the situation (not at the deceased parent or at God) should be recognized at a time like this." [pages 97-98]

"I said to Barry, as I feel religious people should say to those who have been hurt by life, 'This was not your fault. You are a good, decent person who deserves better. I can understand that you feel hurt, confused, angry at what happened, but there is no reason why you should feel guilty. As a man of faith, I have come to you in God's name, not to judge you, but to help you. Will you let me help you?'" [page 104]

"What do we do with our anger when we have been hurt? The goal, if we can achieve it, would be to be angry at the situation, rather than at ourselves, or at those who might have prevented it or are close to us trying to help us, or at God who let it happen. Getting angry at ourselves makes us depressed. Being angry at other people scares them away and makes it harder for them to help us. Being angry at God erects a barrier between us and all the sustaining, comforting resources of religion that are there to help us at such times. But being angry at the situation, recognizing it as something rotten, unfair, and totally undeserved, shouting about it, denouncing it crying over it, permits us to discharge the anger which is a part of being hurt, without making it harder for us to be helped." [pages 108-109]

The second to last chapter answers the question: Given that God isn't all-powerful, what good is He?

## **7. God can't do everything, but he can do some important things.**

*If God didn't cause our problems and can't fix them, why pray? Two reasons: The prayers of others can make us aware that we are not facing our problems alone. And God can give us the strength of character that we need to handle our misfortunes, if we are willing to accept it.*

"Praying for a person's health, for a favorable outcome of an operation, has implications that ought to disturb a thoughtful person. If prayer worked the way many people think it does, no one would ever die. ... If we believe in God, but we do not hold God responsible for life's tragedies, if we believe that God wants justice and fairness but cannot always arrange for them, what are we doing when we pray to God for a favorable outcome to a crisis in our life?" [pages 113-114]

Reasons people give (but Kushner rejects) for why you might not get what you pray for:

- You didn't deserve it.
- You didn't pray hard enough.
- God knows better than you do what is best for you.
- Someone more worthy was praying for the opposite result.
- God doesn't hear prayers.
- There is no God.

Improper prayers, according to the Talmud:

- That God change what already exists. (Example: the sex of a fetus.)
- That God change the laws of nature.
- That someone else be harmed.
- That God do something within our power, so that we don't have to do it.

What's left to pray for?

- Connection with other people. "One goes to a religious service, one recites the traditional prayers, not in order to find God (there are plenty of other places where He can be found), but to find a congregation, to find people with whom you can share that which means the most to you. From that point of view, just being able to pray helps, whether your prayer changes the world outside you or not." [pages 121-122]
- Strength of character, so that we can deal with adversity. "People who pray for miracles usually don't get miracles. ... But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered." [page 125]  
"The God I believe in doesn't send us the problem; He gives us the strength to cope with the problem." [page 127]

"The conventional explanation, that God sends us the burden because He knows that we are strong enough to handle it, has it all wrong. Fate, not God, sends us the problem.

When we try to deal with it, we find out that we are not strong. We are weak; we get tired, we get angry, overwhelmed. We begin to wonder how we will ever make it through all the years. But when we reach the limits of our own strength and courage, something unexpected happens. We find reinforcement coming from a source outside ourselves. And in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God is on our side, we manage to go on." [page 129]

The last chapter is a summary of what has gone before. It adds flourish rather than content.

### **8. What good, then, is religion?**

*Chapter 7 already answered this question. What this chapter really does is wrap up: "Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people? That depends on what we mean by 'answer'. If we mean 'Is there an explanation which will make sense of it all?'... then there probably is no satisfying answer. We can offer learned explanations, but in the end, when we have covered all the squares on the game board and are feeling very proud of our cleverness, the pain and the anguish and the sense of unfairness will still be there. But the word 'answer' can also mean 'response' as well as 'explanation,' and in that sense, there may well be a satisfying answer to the tragedies in our lives. The response would be Job's response in MacLeish's version of the biblical story—to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to the people around us, and to go on living despite it all." [page 147]*

"No one ever promised us a life free from pain and disappointment. The most anyone promised us was that we would not be alone in our pain, and that we would be able to draw upon a source outside ourselves for the strength and courage we would need to survive life's tragedies and life's unfairness." [page 133]

"I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason." [page 134]

"We could bear any burden if we thought there was a meaning to what we were doing. Have I made it harder for people to accept their illnesses, their misfortunes, their family tragedies by telling them that they are not sent by God as part of some master plan of His? Let me suggest that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen to us. They do not happen for any good reason which would cause us to accept them willingly. But we can give them a meaning." [pages 135-136]

"The facts of life and death are neutral. We, by our responses, give suffering either a positive or a negative meaning. Illnesses, accidents, human tragedies kill people. But they do not necessarily kill life or faith. If the death and suffering of someone we love makes us bitter, jealous, against all religion, and incapable of happiness, we turn the person who

died into one of the 'devil's martyrs.' If suffering and death in someone close to us bring us to explore the limits of our capacity for strength and love and cheerfulness, if it leads us to discover sources of consolation we never knew before, then we make the person into a witness for the affirmation of life rather than its rejection." [page 138]

"God, who neither causes nor prevents tragedies, helps by inspiring people to help." [page 140]

"I firmly believe that [my son] Aaron served God's purposes, not by being sick or strange-looking (there was no reason why God should have wanted that), but by facing up so bravely to his illness and to the problems caused by his appearance. I know that his friends and schoolmates were affected by his courage and by the way he managed to live a full life despite his limitations. And I know that people who knew our family were moved to handle the difficult times of their own lives with more hope and courage when they saw our example. I take these as instances of God moving people here on earth to help other people in need." [page 141]

"When people who were not particularly strong become strong in the face of adversity, when people who tended to think only of themselves become unselfish and heroic in an emergency, I have to ask myself where they got these qualities which they would freely admit they did not have before. My answer is that this is one of the ways in which God helps us when we suffer beyond the limits of our own strength." [page 142]

"Our responding to life's unfairness with sympathy and with righteous indignation, God's compassion and God's anger working through us, may be the surest proof of all of God's reality." [pages 142-143]

"Religion alone can affirm the afflicted person's sense of self-worth. Science can describe what has happened to a person; only religion can call it a tragedy. Only the voice of religion, when it frees itself from the need to defend and justify God for all that happens, can say to the afflicted person, 'You are a good person, and you deserve better. Let me come and sit with you so that you will know that you are not alone.'" [page 143]