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to Good People?

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*Thinking Biblically About the
Problem of Sin in Our World*

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A thirteen-year-old girl dies of leukemia. A tornado kills a husband and wife in their home. A young pastor is murdered by his wife. A tsunami kills thousands of unsuspecting vacationers. Children are kidnapped and raped.

Bad things happen all the time. None of us is immune from bad things.

Many ask, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Perhaps it would be easier to understand why bad things happen to bad people. God has created in us an internal sense of justice, and we don’t struggle as much when a violent drug dealer dies in a police shoot-out. But what about when tragedies involve nice people? Or apparently innocent people? Or people who seemingly don’t deserve suffering?

The Bible provides satisfying answers to these questions. However, they are not simple answers because these are not simple questions. Indeed, these questions are related to some of the most profound issues in the universe: Why does evil exist? Are humans intrinsically good, innocent, and deserving of comfortable lives? Why does God permit suffering? What is God’s response to evil?

This booklet uses the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” to organize a brief discussion of these critical issues.

What does the Bible say about *good people*?

Answering the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” begins with realizing that the question is built upon a false assumption. Are people *really* good? Do

good people even exist? To both of these questions, the Bible answers *no*: there are no good people.

Romans 3:9-19 informs us that all humans are deeply affected by sin. Sin's effect is so universal that verses 10-11 say, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God." Verse 12 adds, "There is none who does good, there is not even one." These verses reveal two things about God's assessment of whether or not we are good.

First, all humans are thoroughly and fatally affected by sin. Sin has so corrupted our minds and perverted our desires that we don't understand God's truth. Nor do we sincerely seek to reconcile ourselves to God. When we first read these words, they seem far too strong! We like to think that we understand God (at least a little) and make efforts (at least some) to seek a close relationship with Him. However, God's Word is always correct. The Bible does not exaggerate: it records God's truth and demands that we adjust our thinking to match its declarations. In these verses, the Bible tells us that sin has so severely damaged us humans that *no* unsaved person has an accurate understanding of God and *no* non-Christian sincerely desires a close relationship with God.

Second, these verses declare that sin makes all humans guilty before God. How many unsaved people are righteous in God's sight (or in other words, are good enough to be accepted by God)? None—not even one. How many non-Christians do good (if we define *good* as the Bible defines that word)? None—not even one. That's why this Bible passage ends (in verse 19) with the words "so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God." This means that when we understand the issue of sin and our own sin problem, we no longer protest to God that we are good or deserve entrance into Heaven. Instead, our mouths are closed. We realize that we are guilty sinners before God; we stop arguing our case.

Other Bible passages say the same thing. “The intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth,” says God (Genesis 8:21). “All have sinned.” (Romans 3:23) “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8) The Bible declares repeatedly that in God’s sight, no person is righteous (Psalm 143:2).

Good people? According to God’s criteria, there are no good people.

Of course, many people are kind and friendly. Many are law-abiding citizens who display good manners, are polite, and will give you a helping hand if you need assistance. We all know individuals who routinely sacrifice for the well-being of others. We often call these people *good*, especially when they are compared to other people who cheat, lie, act violently, or display spectacular selfishness. By all means, it is good to be kind, friendly, polite, and law-abiding!

However, this is a limited kind of goodness, one we might call civic goodness or public decency. It is the result of comparing people to other people. The typical American father doesn’t rob banks, so he is comparatively good when placed alongside a bank robber. The average American mom doesn’t go on killing sprees, so she is comparatively good when contrasted with a serial murderer. The average American teen isn’t addicted to illegal narcotics, so he is comparatively good when viewed together with drug addicts. We call these people *good people*, but we only mean that they are good relative to other people. This is important: we are really only comparing not-so-bad people to flagrantly bad people. The criteria for public decency are usually something like courtesy, basic morality, a measure of self-restraint, and avoiding criminal behavior. Many people meet this criteria.

The Bible is not opposed to public decency. It is certainly much better than public indecency! However, God’s Word

instructs us to think about this issue of human goodness in a fundamentally different manner. It tells us to move beyond civic goodness to consider our standing before a holy God. For example, the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) include instructions regarding both our religious obligations to God and our moral behavior here on earth. In other words, God gave us divine standards for worship and conduct.

Not surprisingly, these God-given standards are far more rigorous than the ethical guidelines embraced by our community. It is not too difficult to earn the label *good* if we measure ourselves by criteria like “don’t rob banks,” “don’t physically assault people,” and “don’t use curse words.” God’s criteria, however, are more demanding.

What does the Bible say about *good people*? Most importantly, it says that God determines the criteria for *good*. When it comes to assessing whether we are good or bad in God’s eyes, we can neither compare ourselves to other people nor grade ourselves based upon our culture’s definition of good citizenship. Rather, the Bible demands that we compare ourselves to the standards God has established in the Bible.

Here’s another way of thinking about this. We typically measure *horizontally* to determine if someone is a good person. That means we measure people against other people, or we measure people by accepted community ethical guidelines. We keep our comparisons on the horizontal (or earth-bound) level of other people. But God says that we must measure goodness *vertically*. That means we must measure ourselves not against others, but rather against God’s from-Heaven-down-to-earth instructions. To assess goodness, I look up (vertically) to consider God’s criteria.

What is God’s assessment when He measures us by His criteria? “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12)

This issue becomes clearer when we understand how the Bible defines *sin*. We tend to use this word for only spectacular wrongdoing like murder or adultery. If only high-profile acts of evil qualify as sin, many of us can conclude that we are not guilty of it. However, the Bible doesn't define *sin* in this manner. The Word of God explains it like this:

- “Sin is lawlessness.” (1 John 3:4) Sin is *any* disobedience to *any* of God's laws. Sin is doing something that God commands us not to do, which is called a sin of commission. We also commit sins of omission when we know what is right but fail to do it (James 4:17).
- Sin is failing to worship God as He instructs and deserves. Sin has a vertical (or Godward) dimension as well as a horizontal (or human-to-human) one. Failures to serve God are sin, as are failures to honor God and give Him thanks (Romans 1:21).
- Sin is violating God's requirements regarding our inward attitudes. God's laws extend to the motives and desires of the heart, thus requiring holiness in thought and not merely outward conduct (Matthew 5:21-48; Romans 8:5; Luke 6:43-46; James 4:1-3).
- Sin is more than a moral weakness or an ethical handicap: it renders us spiritually dead. This means that our hearts (or natures) are corrupted and inclined toward evil. Sin makes us spiritually blind (Ephesians 2:1,12).
- Sin exerts an enslaving power that ensnares and dominates us. Our wills are not free to please God; they are in bondage to sin. Hence Jesus says that “everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.” (John 8:34; Romans 6:6-20, 7:14; Galatians 4:8)
- Sin alienates and separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2; Colossians 1:21). Sin ruptures the relationship between us and our Creator. Sin fuels in the sinner an ongoing state of hostility against God (Romans 5:10, 8:7).

So when God tells us, "You shall not steal," it means that any act of theft is a sin because it is a violation of God's law. God says, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," so any misuse of God's name (whether in cursing or irreverent joking) is a sin. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," says God, which means that lying (and especially lying that hurts someone else) is sin. God commands, "You shall not covet," so inappropriate desires for what we do not have are sins. The Bible says "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church," so husbands sin when they fail to love their wives in a Christ-like manner. When God says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord," it means children sin when they disobey their parents.

A man once asked the Lord Jesus Christ which of God's commandments was the most important. Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind." (Luke 10:27) That means we sin when we don't cherish God above all other things, don't prioritize Him, and love Him only halfheartedly or lukewarmly.

Here's an example of how God's commandments (and therefore our sins) reach beyond actions to heart attitudes. One of God's commandments is "You shall not murder." Of course, cold-blooded murder is a sin. But the Lord Jesus Christ explained that this commandment actually extends to the angry thoughts that are the root of murder. Jesus clarified the meaning of this command with these words: "I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery Hell." (Matthew 5:22) Jesus is explaining here that murder is only the most spectacular manifestation of sinful anger. When we harbor intense anger within our heart, we are violating God's commandment. We reveal this deep-seated rage

when we angrily call people names or insult them. Jesus' main point here: God requires much more than just not murdering people. God requires the absence of anger and rage in our hearts. When anger boils inside us, we sin.

Once we understand that God establishes a comprehensive definition of sin in the Bible, we can then understand why the Bible says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) *All* humans are guilty of sin. People who possess civic goodness or public decency are not exempted. When compared to God's standards—God's behavior-related and worship-related requirements—even the friendliest person is a sinner. The most courteous person you know still sins, both in thought and in action. This is a truth admitted across the globe and even in non-Christian cultures. As the old Chinese proverb puts it, there are two kinds of people who do not sin: the one who is not yet born and the one who is dead.

Regretfully, we humans suffer from a religious version of Tallest Pygmy Syndrome (TPS). TPS is what causes a full-grown pygmy man who is only 4' 9" tall to boast that he is so much taller than everyone else. He prides himself on his soaring physical stature, but he can do this only because he is comparing himself to a room full of other pygmies—all of whom are shorter than him. His boasting is almost comical: far from being tall, he is actually quite short. He is only the tallest pygmy! We sinners display something like TPS when we assess ourselves and think that we are good. Far from being good, we are only good in a world full of moral and spiritual pygmies. We are actually quite bad.

It may be that no Bible concept is more misunderstood than the concept of sin. In particular, we persistently downplay the extent and seriousness of sin. Why? In part because one of the results of sin is that we don't see our own sins clearly. Sin obscures God and separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), and

our awareness of our own sin is in proportion to our nearness to God. When God is only an occasional thought, sin is likewise a foreign concept. This is one reason (among many) why we must hear the Bible's assessment of sin: the Scriptures provide the penetrating light of truth that cuts through the blinding fog of sin in our soul. We profit greatly when we adjust our thinking to conform to the Bible's declarations regarding sin.

The Bible is unrelenting in its declarations that sin is both pervasive and disastrous. For example, consider Ephesians 4:17-19: "This I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness." Here the Bible is describing how sin affects non-Christians, which is the practical meaning of the word *Gentiles* in this passage. Sin makes our minds futile (or useless) when it comes to comprehending spiritual realities. Sin darkens or obscures our understanding. Sin cuts us off from the life of God, in part because of the spiritual ignorance that sin promotes in us. Sin also makes our hearts hard and calloused: we don't care about God and what He values. Because sin makes us malfunction like this on the inside, on the outside we surrender ourselves to sensuality, impurity, and greediness. Even non-Christians who display civic goodness or public decency have minds darkened by sin, are cut off from the life of God, and possess hearts hardened against God's truth.

Or consider Titus 1:15. This verse describes people who have not been redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ. It explains that "both their mind and their conscience are defiled." That means that sin has corrupted both their internal thinking processes and their moral reasoning ability. Of course, we

often don't see this. But the Bible tells us that when it comes to thinking about moral and religious issues, we think with a sin-impaired mind (1 Corinthians 2:12,14). This explains why Romans 8:7-8 says that until we have been rescued from our sin by Jesus Christ, our minds are hostile toward God, our thinking is not even able to submit to the law of God, and we cannot please God.

Are we really good people?

The Lord Jesus Christ said that sin affects not only our mind but also our desires. Once in a discussion with religious leaders, Jesus explained why these men—despite their Bible knowledge and religious activities—did not agree with Him and instead rejected His words. “Why do you not understand what I am saying?” Jesus asked. He answered His own question: “It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.” (John 8:44) These men did not think that they were doing what Satan wanted them to do; surely they were shocked at this idea that they were unknowingly following the devil! But Jesus' point was that sin had so perverted these men that their desires were actually the same as the devil's desires, although they didn't realize it. Why do we sin over and over again? Because we love to sin. “Men loved the darkness rather than the light,” said Jesus (John 3:19). He meant that before we are saved from sin, we want to sin.

How serious is our sin problem? It is so serious that the Bible characterizes us as spiritually dead. “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,” wrote the Apostle Paul, as he reminded some Christians of what they were like before they were regenerate. He continued: “You were by nature children of wrath.” (Ephesians 2:1,3) Because of their very nature—not their external behavior but their internal moral constitution—God's righteous judgment was upon them. “You were dead in your transgressions,” the inspired apostle told a different community of Christians (Colossians 2:13).

Sin does not merely handicap us; it renders us spiritually lifeless. The result? Being excluded (or alienated) from the life of God (Ephesians 4:18).

Are we really good people?

People who have not been redeemed by God's saving grace live lives that are marked by envy, strife, selfish ambition, and outbursts of anger (Galatians 5:19-21). Even good citizens display greed, deceit, boasting, and a lack of mercy if they are not regenerate; in addition, disobedience to parents is a universal malady (Romans 1:29-31). Sexual immorality dominates our television shows and movies because Hollywood caters to our sexual lusts. The Bible lumps together those who steal with fornicators, adulterers, and homosexuals (1 Corinthians 6:9-10); it puts those who lie and those who murder in the same class (Revelation 21:8). The Bible describes sinful men as mean-spirited, prone to hate others, and enslaved to various lusts and pleasures (Titus 3:3).

Consider this true story from the foreign mission field. A missionary journeyed to a remote tribe that had never heard of the Bible. He was welcomed by the natives and treated with great honor. The missionary lived with the people for several years, learning the natives' language so he could translate the Bible into their own words. These primitive people were excited to have a foreigner with them, and they showered him with many kindnesses. After much labor, the missionary began translating the Bible into the natives' language. At last the great day came: the missionary began to read God's Word to the natives in their own tongue! In time, he came to one of the many places in the Scriptures where specific sins are identified. But upon reading the Bible's penetrating exposure of sins for several minutes, the horrified natives frantically stopped the missionary. "You cannot tell other people about our bad secrets!" the natives protested. "You have lived with us for years and know our evil habits. You cannot record our wicked behaviors in a book so that

other people may read about them! You will embarrass us!” The missionary explained to his distressed friends that his book was not a tattletale book that reported evil tribal practices to outsiders. Rather, his book was God’s book – one that God wrote thousands of years ago – that described the sinfulness of *all* men, no matter where and when they lived. This story dramatizes a critical truth: the Bible exposes our sin in unflattering terms.

Perhaps most unflattering is the Bible’s comparison of our sinful condition to slavery. Our will is in bondage to sin because sin is rooted in our natures. By *will*, we mean that part of us that chooses what we think, say, and do. Our will is not free from the sinful influences of our fallen nature; rather, our will is enslaved to our morally corrupt desires. Thus Jesus spoke of sinners being the slaves of sin (John 8:34) and the Apostle Paul described himself as sold into bondage to sin (Romans 7:14). In Martin Luther’s words, the unredeemed sinner’s will “is not free at all, but is the permanent prisoner and bondsman of evil.”

The Bible’s teaching about sin is not that we are as bad as we could possibly be. (Even Adolf Hitler walked past a few dogs that he didn’t kick.) Sometimes the biblical concept of sin is expressed with the term *total depravity*. This helpful phrase correctly communicates that sin corrupts my mind, emotions, conscience, body, and decision-making ability. In other words, sin corrupts my *total* person, and hence the term *total depravity*. “The heart” is how the Bible refers to the total person. “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9) “The intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” (Genesis 8:21) “The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives.” (Ecclesiastes 9:3) Sin is like a thorough burglar who vandalizes the total house, leaving no room unviolated.

It is true that the unregenerate sinner can still entertain some religious thoughts, can still hear his conscience tell him that certain behaviors are wrong, and can still admire the virtuous acts of other people. An unsaved man won't commit every sin imaginable. Although spiritually dead, a non-Christian can still be somewhat polite, courteous, kind, and patient. But sin has contaminated every part of the unregenerate person. His moral corruption (or his depravity) extends to his total being.

Sin's pervasiveness means that unsaved sinners are incapable of what might be called spiritual goodness, which is goodness according to God's standards (and is different from civic goodness). Because sin pollutes the unregenerate man's total being—and therefore defiles all his thoughts and behaviors—he cannot meet the demands of God's holy and perfect law. He cannot understand spiritual things (1 Corinthians 2:14). He cannot change his fundamental preference for sin into a fundamental love for God. He is unable to love or choose the things that are pleasing to God. The sinful mind “does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” (Romans 8:7-8) Thus total depravity is related to *total inability*: the unsaved man lacks the ability to either earn God's approval or remedy his sinful condition.

So here is what the Bible teaches: Before we are rescued from our sins by Christ, God sees us as bad people. We are sinners. We break God's laws many times and qualify as repeat offenders. We are not good people.

Why do bad things happen to good people? We begin answering this question biblically when we realize that *there are no good people*. All humans are deeply affected by sin. Because of sin, we disobey God constantly. We may be polite, kind, and decent; we may avoid outrageous public sins like arson and murder. But God sees all our actions, knows our

inner attitudes, judges by His criteria, and concludes, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God . . . there is none who does good, there is not even one." (Romans 3:10-12)

What does the Bible say about *bad things*?

Our world was obviously created by a God who is good. It is home to beautiful sunsets, giggling babies, human love, and flowers with spectacular colors. But bad things happen in our world. A short list includes fatal diseases, the death of infants, hurricanes and tornadoes, inhumane wars, drug addiction, and suicide terrorist attacks. Some people are so overcome by greed that they steal. Others are so overcome by anger that they commit murder. Still others are so overcome by depression that they commit suicide.

Why do bad things happen? Often because of man's sin.

The Bible reports that in the beginning, God created a perfect world. "It is very good," said God when He assessed His completed creation (Genesis 1:31). Adam and Eve had not yet sinned, so sin had not yet entered the world. There was no violence and no lying, no anger and no sexual immorality, no atheism and no irreverence. Adam and Eve's relationship to God was perfect: they loved God supremely, worshiped Him wholeheartedly, and obeyed Him cheerfully. With regard to their relationship to each other, they enjoyed a marriage that was ideal. Adam and Eve were truly good (in the biblical sense of the word), and God's creation was unmarred by sin. The Garden of Eden was literally a sin-free Paradise.

There were no bad things in the world before Adam's fall into sin.

Following the sin of Adam and Eve, however, everything changed. Sin corrupted Adam's mind, emotions, and will. Adam transmitted his new fallen nature to all his offspring so

that every human possesses a sinful nature from the time of his birth (Romans 5:12-21; Psalm 51:5, 58:3). This is called *original sin*, and it has enormous consequences. Because all humans are born with sinful natures, we do not understand God, do not seek for God, and are alienated from God (Romans 3:11, 5:19; Colossians 1:21). Our sin is the result of neither environment nor imitation; we are *by nature* children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3).

Sin's introduction into the world affected not only humans: it corrupted the physical world itself. This resulted in what the Bible calls the natural world's bondage to decay (Romans 8:20-22; Genesis 3:17). Sin has stained every aspect of our world.

God created a sin-free world. Thanks to sin, we now live in a fallen world—a world that is thoroughly and fatally dysfunctional because of sin. Sin contaminates the very best of human efforts, so human institutions like governments, schools, and businesses display the effects of sin. So do human enterprises like music, art, recreation, and literature. Even human religion is corrupted by sin, which is why we have seen wars, lying, hatred, and human sacrifices justified in the name of religion.

We shouldn't be surprised that bad things happen in a world permeated with sin. Bad things are often a product of sin. A world full of sin results in a world full of bad things. This is true for three reasons.

First, sin is disobedience to God's laws. God's commandments are neither arbitrary nor reasonless; rather, they are a loving Creator's instructions for how to live life correctly. God prohibits sin for several reasons, one of them being sin's power to destroy us and make us miserable. We thrive when we obey God's commands, in part because those laws direct us to live in ways that are conducive to successful living. Thus

when men disobey God's laws, they create all kinds of difficulties for themselves. Sin is the moral equivalent of putting sugar into a car's gas tank or replacing a car's motor oil with sawdust: when we do things that are harmful to the car—when we disobey the operating instructions provided by the car's manufacturer—bad things happen to the car.

Our bad decisions (namely our decisions to sin) result in bad things. We could call these self-inflicted bad things.

Here's an example. God's laws call for marriage to be a permanent and holy union between one man and one woman. All sexual relations must be confined to marriage. Humans are most fulfilled and society functions best when men obey these instructions. But when we sinfully disregard God's laws by engaging in adultery, premarital sex, or homosexuality, human suffering multiplies. Men and women are hurt. Families are shattered. Children are devastated. Misery is multiplied. All kinds of bad things happen because of sin.

God says, "Obey My commands." If we disobey them and then—while persisting in sin—experience bad things, whose fault is that?

Second, the Bible reports that Satan is linked to sin and hardship. Some may dismiss the concept of the devil as an old-fashioned idea, but we cannot believe the Bible without believing its numerous statements regarding Satan. God's Word informs us that the devil is quite active in this present world. He murders men's souls (John 8:44) and devours men (1 Peter 5:8), usually by ensnaring them in sin (Ephesians 2:2, 1 Thessalonians 3:5). Indeed, Satan's primary activity in this present age is tempting men to sin. At least sometimes, the Adversary oppresses men with physical and mental illnesses (Acts 10:38; Job 2:7; Luke 13:11,16; 2 Corinthians 12:7). This does not mean that all bad things are caused by Satan, but a sin-infested world is a world where the devil enjoys significant influence. Surely the devil plays some role in filling God's good creation with bad things.

Third, bad things sometimes happen because they are God's judgments upon specific sins. For good reason, we regard justice to be a virtue. We disapprove of earthly judges who let lawbreakers go free without punishment. We believe (correctly) that justice demands punishment (at least at some point). Good judges display mercy but also know when it is time to administer justice.

God is a good judge. He is patient with regard to punishing sinners: sin deserves immediate judgment, but God does not treat us as our sins deserve (Psalm 103:10). He responds to our sin with a kindness designed to lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4). But sometimes God decides to administer justice now. It is perfectly reasonable and fair for the righteous Judge to punish sin today.

This doesn't mean that every bad thing is an act of God's judgment against sin. The Bible specifically tells us that sometimes bad things are *not* acts of divine judgment (John 9:2-3). Jesus warns us to not assume that bad things befall one person because he is a worse sinner than someone else (Luke 13:1-5). But at least sometimes, bad things happen because a holy God is responding with justice to men who violate His laws (1 Corinthians 11:30; Acts 5:1-11; 2 Samuel 12:13-14). Indeed, the very first sin resulted in immediate bad things for Adam and Eve, among them expulsion from God's garden Paradise (Genesis 3:16-19; Ezekiel 28:13).

The bad things in our world should not make us angry at God. Instead, they should make us angry at sin.

The Bible has one more important thing to say about bad things: *sometimes they only appear to be bad*. God blesses those whom He loves by using difficulties to mature them. Affliction is often God's tool for sanctifying His people. (See for example Psalm 119:67, 71, 75; Romans 5:3-5; and James 1:2-4.) Because we do not see God's sovereign hand working

invisibly behind the scenes, we sometimes wrongly assume that a bad thing has befallen us. In such cases, alleged bad things are really good things. They are blessings in disguise. We can be like the small child who receives an inoculation at the doctor's office: because of his lack of understanding, the child regards the shot as a bad thing with no benefits whatsoever. But the child is wrong: the shot is a good thing that will be beneficial in the long run.

Are you still wondering why Jane Doe down the street lost her daughter to leukemia but you didn't? Or why a tornado destroyed John Smith's home while your home was spared? We will likely never know, at least not until we arrive in Heaven. God possesses comprehensive and perfect wisdom; we don't. That means we frequently will not understand why things happen. Don't be surprised if your mind can't answer all the questions in the universe!

It is helpful to remember Moses' words regarding God's "secret things." Perhaps no person enjoyed such intimate friendship with God as Moses. But even after understanding more of God's mind than perhaps any other human, Moses declared, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law." (Deuteronomy 29:29) Notice that Moses distinguished between "secret things" and "things revealed." God discloses some things (indeed, many things) to us humans, but some things remain secrets. That means we don't and won't know everything.

Here's one encouraging thing that we *do* know: "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28) We know that God is currently orchestrating a vast "conspiracy of kindness" for those who are united by a saving faith to the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Why do *good* things happen to *bad* people?

This is the real question! Once we understand the seriousness of our sin and the implications of God's holiness, we can't help but ask, "Why do so many good things happen to sinners like us — who are so bad?"

If we measure goodness and badness by God's standards, then we are all bad people. Across the planet, people live lives that openly disobey God's laws. Even the most morally upright men admit that they sin. Given these facts, shouldn't we expect an unending and persistent torrent of bad things? A world permeated with sin should logically be a world permeated with bad things. A world populated with men who reject God's laws should be a world where men experience one bad thing after another.

But that is not what our world is like, is it? The fact is that most people enjoy many good things in their lives. Our world includes vacations, affectionate hugs, immunizations against fatal diseases, and small children's birthday parties. Even the worst of men usually know what it means to laugh, fall in love, and enjoy ice cream. The average American today can expect to live to be seventy-seven years old, not twenty-seven. It is likely that we are so painfully aware of the bad things in our lives precisely because we are so accustomed to enjoying a steady stream of good things.

Why do good things happen to bad people? Because God is good. He is kind, patient, and compassionate. Despite the universality of sin, God permits us to enjoy more good things than we have any right to expect. God demonstrates mercy, which means He gives aid to people who need help. God dispenses grace, which means He freely gives good things to people who don't deserve them. We enjoy lives that are more comfortable and secure than our sin would warrant. Because God is good, we laugh far more than we deserve.

God is determined that we understand this aspect of His character; accordingly, the Bible contains many declarations of His goodness. Psalm 106:44-46 reports that although Israel was chronically disobedient to God and repeatedly rebelled against His authority, “nevertheless He looked upon their distress when He heard their cry . . . and relented according to the greatness of His lovingkindness. He also made them objects of His compassion.” Psalm 145:8-9 echoes the same truth: “The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works.” The poor and needy are special objects of God’s tenderness (Psalm 72:12-14). James tells us, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” (James 1:17)

The Bible says that God “has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” (Psalm 103:10) Isn’t that true in your own life? Isn’t it true that God has not given you the punishment that your sins deserve?

Perhaps the most surprising truth about our world is that a holy God—who is consistently disobeyed, insulted, and ignored by His creatures—showers sinners with so many good things. Because God is kind and generous, there is an unexpectedly large amount of pleasure in this world.

This is called God’s *common grace*. When the Lord Jesus Christ said that God “causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45), He was referring to good things that God gives to all men—despite their sin. In order to restrain the wickedness of men, God created human government to maintain a measure of law, order, and peace (Romans 13:1-7); this, too, is an example of common grace. God kindly imparts to every human an innate sense of right and wrong (Romans 1:19,32; 2:14-16); although deeply marred by sin, this intuitive moral sense makes civic goodness or public decency

possible. Men everywhere rise up in protest against rape, murder, and kidnaping because God mercifully prevents our sin from extinguishing all sense of morality. Indeed, God restrains the sin in men so that we only rarely see serial murderers and government-sponsored genocide.

But *why* does God act kindly toward sinful men? The Bible provides a clear answer: “Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4) The first part of this verse warns us to neither ignore nor misunderstand God’s purpose in causing good things to happen to bad people. Far too often, we turn God’s patience into an excuse for more sin (Ecclesiastes 8:11). We misinterpret God’s kindness as indication that He approves of all we do. But the purpose behind God’s goodness is disclosed in the second part of Romans 2:4: God’s kindness is intended to lead us to repent. God is good to us so that we will change our minds about sin and repair our relationship with Him. God’s patience should constrain us to turn to Him with a sin-rejecting and self-surrendering faith.

Good things don’t happen to bad people because God doesn’t care if they are bad. Rather, good things happen to bad people so that they will repent and stop being bad.

Complain to God because of the bad things that happen? Such thinking only demonstrates how extensively sin distorts our minds. Our planet is populated by people who are not good at all. “There is none righteous, not even one,” says God’s Word. “There is none who does good, there is not even one.” (Romans 3:10,12) But despite the pervasiveness of sin, we live in a world where a startlingly high number of good things happen. Who would expect so many good things when there are so many bad people? Who would expect a holy God to deal so generously with disobedient rebels? Who would expect so much beauty, so much recreation, so much

laughter, and so much love in a fallen world? God is so consistently good to us that we often take His goodness for granted . . . and then are surprised when bad things happen. How does the Holy One of Israel lead sinful men to repentance? With the gentle tools of kindness and forbearance and patience (Romans 2:4).

“The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works.” (Psalm 145:8-9)

What is the very best thing that can happen to bad people?

The very best thing that could happen to bad people? If God designed a rescue plan to save us from our sins.

The very best thing would be a comprehensive plan to deliver us from both the punishment our sins deserve and the miseries on earth that our sinful behavior produces.

The very best thing would be a God-invented rescue package that was free—that didn’t require cash payments or rigorous disciplines or child sacrifices.

The very best thing would be if the success of this rescue operation depended not upon the ability or will-power of fickle sinners like us, but rather upon the determination and power of God Himself.

Good news! This is exactly what God has done in the Lord Jesus Christ!

God sent His Son to be the Rescuer of all His people. Jesus was born of a human mother and lived a perfectly sinless life on earth. Jesus both avoided every sin and fully obeyed all God’s laws. That means that Jesus established a perfect righteousness before God the Father. (You could think of it

like earning a score of 100 percent on God's holiness test: perfect conformity to *all* God's requirements.)

Then "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) Jesus went to the cross, where all the sins of all God's people were placed upon (or imputed to) Him. At the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ became the divine Sin-Bearer. The Bible calls Him "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) When Jesus died on the cross, He died as the substitutionary offering for our sin. I deserve God's punishment for my many sins, but they were transferred to Jesus and He received the punishment that I deserve. In other words, the penalty due to me for my sins was paid by Jesus at the cross.

Talk about bad things happening to good people! Jesus was the only Man who truly *was* a good person. He is the only Man (actually a God-Man) who did not deserve bad things and did not deserve to die. Yet He willingly bore the sins of His people, and therefore He bore their sin-related punishment as well. He did this so that He might rescue them from their sins. Jesus "bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed." (1 Peter 2:24)

At the cross, the Son of God experienced something that we humans can only imagine. God the Father poured out upon Jesus the full punishment for all the sins of all God's people who ever lived and ever will live. The punishment equivalent to millions of eternities in Hell fell upon the Lord Jesus Christ. It was God striking God so that sins might be paid for fully. If I were to spend eternity in Hell for my own sins, I would never satisfy God's just demands against me. That's one reason why Hell persists for all eternity: no amount of human suffering can ever satisfy God's infinitely holy demands for justice. But at the cross, Jesus *satisfied* God's righteous claims against sin. When God's Son died for sin, the payment was sufficiently large to put away sin fully. We

know that Jesus' death satisfied God's holy demands because He was resurrected from the dead and then ascended back into Heaven. The bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (which was attested to by numerous eyewitnesses) is proof that the Messiah truly conquered sin.

Amazingly, the Son of God secured a forgiveness for God's people that includes justification. Forgiveness is God not counting our sins against us; justification is God counting Jesus Christ's perfect righteousness as *our* righteousness. Justification is Jesus imputing (or crediting) His own flawless righteousness to His people. The justified sinner stands before a holy God both completely forgiven of all his sins *and* clothed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ Himself. The Bible expresses this truth succinctly in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." God declares the justified sinner to be righteous.

This God-created rescue plan has other benefits as well. We will note only one here. The risen Lord Jesus Christ—through the working of the Holy Spirit—breaks the power of sin in the Christian's life (Romans 6:6-7). The believer still carries within himself the remnants of sin, but sin has lost its commanding power. Because of the resurrection power of Christ and the here-and-now working of the Holy Spirit, the Christian no longer wants to sin and is no longer powerless to resist it. The Christian finds his very nature transformed: he now wants to deny his own desires, take up his cross, and follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does this comprehensive rescue plan cost? For God, it was terribly expensive: it cost Him the life of His Son. For us sinners, it is gloriously free.

God offers salvation through His Son on the basis of grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 states this clearly: "By grace you have

been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." *Grace* means unmerited favor; in the case of us sinners, it means God's favor in the face of no merit whatsoever. Romans 3:24 uses similar language: it speaks of believers being "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." Gifts are not earned; they are only received with gratitude.

We receive this gift by faith. Biblical faith is more than mental agreement regarding the facts about Jesus: it is loving, trusting, and believing commitment of your whole person to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is resting in the Bible's declaration of Jesus's complete resolution of your sin problem. It is having confidence that your sins have been forgiven and you are justified – not because of something you have done, but rather because of (and only because of) what the Savior has done. Jesus Christ saves through (or by) the instrument of faith.

Justification is by grace alone through faith alone. This is an all-expenses paid rescue plan. Jesus paid it all!

Of course, what Jesus accomplished was a rescue *from sin*, so true faith is a faith that wants to repent of sin, turn away from sin, and stop doing sin. The person who does not want to obey God's laws is a person who does not want to be rescued from sin. Such a person does not want a Savior; he wants permission to continue sinning without the fear of consequences. But the person who is truly fed up with living a life of sin will find in the risen Christ an effective remedy for his sin problem.

God Himself undertakes a rescue operation to save people from their badness. The Lord Jesus Christ died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18). Christ's triumphant resurrection proclaims the message "mission accomplished!" God makes sure

that the rescue mission succeeds. The cost for receiving God's remedy for sin? It is a free gift! God now commands all men everywhere to repent, and He promises that whosoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Hear the words of Jesus: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Surely this is the very best thing that can happen to bad people!

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