

When Bad Things Happen to Good People

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.

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.

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]