

## When It Seems God Has Let You Down

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### 2 Job 42:1-6, Romans 8:28

Mrs. Kelly was my 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, and Herbert was the teacher's pet. Before class one day Herbert said to us, "It's Mrs. Kelly's birthday. Let's sing *Happy Birthday* to her!" Herbert was in the school chorus. He'd lead the singing, and so we agreed.

The bell rings. Mrs. Kelly walks in, closes the door, and begins to take roll. Herbert, with a big grin on his face, walks up and stands by her desk. He looks out at the rest of us and begins singing, "*Happy birthday to you...*" There was a problem, though. The class had had second thoughts. Herbert was sort of a pain, and we decided not to sing along. And so there he was, all alone, when Mrs. Kelly asks, "Herbert, just what are you doing?"

He was being let down by the class. Not only did we not sing along, it wasn't even Mrs. Kelly's birthday. Someone had intentionally misinformed him. And we all of us know how he felt. We can compose a long list of people who have let us down and how they've done so. We can also compose a long list of people whom we have let down, but that's another sermon. Let's focus this morning on the concern of being let down, and not by just anyone, but by no less than God. Have you ever felt that God has let you down?

As we deal with this question, it might help us to remember that our relationship with God isn't like our relationship with others. Obviously, God is invisible, hidden and formless in the world of our five senses. One of the problems this presents is uncertainty as to how God interacts with us. How does God help? What does God expect? With other people, we know that we can count on Sam for this but not for that. We also know what Samantha's expectations of us are. But what about God? What expectations do we have of our relationship with God?

One thing we'd like to get out of a relationship with God is an easy life. That's consistent with human nature, isn't it? God, give me an easy life. But in the Bible, which is the approved version of our history with the invisible God, God doesn't promise an easy life. What God promises is the strength or fortitude to be faithful to what God requires of us.

Moses and the Israelites sang, "The Lord is my strength and my might" (Ex. 15: 2), and we know they didn't have an easy life. The early church didn't have an easy go of it either, and the most common beginning of the letters they received is this: "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" And always in that order. Grace to you and peace. Never, peace to you and grace. Why? Because God's grace, which strengthens us to be faithful, produces peace.

Still, at times we may feel that God has let us down because of the difficulties we're going through. How could God let this happen to me? Still, such thinking doesn't square with what we find in the Bible. Our NT lesson says, "In everything God works for good with those who love him." The question to ask is not, "How could God let this happen to me?" but "How is God working with me, and what can I do in response, given my situation?"

Another thing we'd like out of our relationship with God are answers to certain questions, the big one being, surprise, "Why did God let such a thing happen?" Philip Yancey, the author of *Reaching for the Invisible God*, received a telephone call from a television producer shortly after Princess Diana died in the car crash. Remember that? The

producer asked, "Can you appear on our show? We want you to explain how God could possibly allow such a terrible accident?" Yancey replied without thinking, "Gee, could it have had something to do with a drunk driver going ninety miles an hour in a narrow tunnel? How exactly was God involved?"

After hanging up, Yancey pulled out a folder containing notes in which God had been blamed for letting certain people down. There was a quote from boxer Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini, who had just slugged another boxer so hard that the boxer died. At the press conference, Mancini said, "Sometimes I wonder why God does the things he does." Why God did what? Slugged the other guy? And in a letter to Dr. James Dobson, a young woman wrote, "Four years ago I was dating a man and became pregnant. I was devastated. I asked God, 'Why have you allowed this to happen to me?'" But again, how is it exactly that God let her down?

There is a statement in The Lord's Prayer, perhaps the most misunderstood statement of them all, that confronts the reality that oftentimes we ourselves have let ourselves down. It's the last statement, "*Lead us not into temptation,*" or better, "Lead us not into the act of temptation." Many think that this is a prayer that God not let us be tempted, but it's not. Granted, the wording it is not terribly clear, but it is actually a prayer that we not lead God into temptation. Look, it makes no sense for God, who wants us to do what's right, to tempt us to do what is wrong. Would you do that to your loved ones? Would you tell them do what is right, and then tempt them to do wrong? James 1:13,14, says, "No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted by evil and himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire."

It is not uncommon that we try to tempt God to do our will. In essence, we pray, "God, if you really love me, you will help me get my way." Jesus was tempted to pray this way, and rejected it as bogus. Remember how when he was in the wilderness, Satan took him to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'They will catch you so that you will not even bruise your foot on the pavement.'" (Ten or more stories to the bottom of the temple mount from there, if I remember right.)

And wouldn't it be something if Satan's twisted interpretation of scripture was true? We wouldn't have to look before we leap. We could throw caution to the wind. God will catch us! God will clean up our mess! But Jesus saw through Satan's lie. "It is written, 'Do not tempt the Lord your God to go along with your own plans.' Otherwise, they will scrape you up with a spatula."

Let's not blame God when we do as we please and it goes sour. One thing God does not sign off on is our will as opposed to God's will. Kierkegaard said that prayer should be thought of as a daily struggle with God. We say, "I want this, God." And then we listen for what God has to say about our plan or want. And what we hear is based largely on what we have learned about God in church and in the Bible. Then, when God doesn't agree with what we want, we may go around and around. But as Kierkegaard says: prayer, at least at times, is a struggle of wills with God in which we win when God wins. What's best for us is God's will, not ours. "In everything God works for good with those who love him," certainly in prayer.

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Things happen to us and to others that clearly we cannot blame on God. It wasn't God's will. But then there are those things that we're not so sure about. Like, why did I come down with this disease when I have always worked to take care of my health? Or

why did I go to school to learn a trade, and now I can't find a job? There are many such questions, and our tendency may be to blame things like these on God. God has let us down. But before we think this way, let me remind you about Job in our OT lesson.

We know three things about Job from early-on in the story. One, he has suffered the loss of all his wealth, and he was very wealthy. Two, he has suffered the death of all his children, whom he dearly loved. And three, because we're able to see behind the scenes in the Book of Job, we know that in none of this is the man Job to blame, which his friends think is the case. The friends say Job must have done something horrible to deserve such suffering. Not so. God is not punishing Job for something he did wrong.

Job, though, doesn't know what the reader knows. In his opinion, life should be fair. You do right, you should prosper, not suffer. And he's done right. He's done nothing to deserve such punishment, such suffering. God has let him down. God is not living up to his end of the relationship. And so Job does the unheard of. He demands an audience with God and is granted one. This conversation between the two begins in chapter 38, and consists largely of God asking Job to imagine how complicated and incomprehensible the workings of God's creation are.

According to God, life is not at all as simple as we'd like to think. For example, God makes it clear that he still does battle with his old enemy, chaos. Do you remember Genesis 1? *"In the beginning when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void."* This formless void is none other than a swirling mass of chaos. God separated light from this dark chaos, and land from this watery chaos, etc. But even today the chaos is still around. It won't disappear, according to the Book of Revelation, until Jesus returns and the new world begins. And this chaos can do us damage as it oversteps its boundaries. Nothing personal. We're just in the way.

One of the things God says to Job is, "Where were you... when I prescribed bounds for the sea and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther; here your proud waves shall stop.'" Well, not only was Job not taking a stroll on the beach that day, but Job had no idea how hard it is to keep the devastation in this life – tidal waves, hurricanes – from overstepping their bounds and slapping us around. Same with such chaos as drought, illness, violence, etc. Most of the time this devastating chaos stays in its place – God created an orderly world in Genesis 1 – but not always. And in our scripture lesson, Job has begun to understand how incomprehensible God's creation is. "I have complained about things of which I have no understanding."

There is no promise made in the Bible that we will have an easy life, but there is the promise that God will give us the needed strength to keep going to a better day. "In everything, God works for good with those who love him." Ours is to work with God who is seeking only what is good for us.

One time there was a group of sailors going through basic training. The objective before them that day was to climb a 12-foot-high diving platform and jump off into a swimming pool. This one sailor, when it's his turn, gets to the end of the diving board but can't bring himself to jump. The instructor calls out, "Your ship is sinking! All hands overboard! What are you going to do?" The sailor answers, "Let it sink ten more feet."

When our ship is going down, it is not wise to let it sink ten more feet before we make up our mind about God's involvement in our lives. By then we'll be pulled under with the ship. Ours is to believe the good news that God doesn't let us down. "In everything God works for good with those who love him." Take the leap of faith and work with God. Amen