

"Why Me?"

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¹⁵Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." ²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. ²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." ²²So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. ²³But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) ²⁵When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"²⁶Laban said, "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." ²⁸Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. (Genesis 29:15-28)

Last Sunday, we looked at the dream Jacob was given while he was on the run from his brother's vengeance. That dream was a thoroughly divine experience, containing both a heavenly vision and an eternal promise. This morning, however, the divine, spiritual high of that dream has been left far, far behind. In just a few verses, we descend into a much more human world, one marked by the challenges of being in a family business, the joys and pains of falling in love, and the grief that comes when human beings hurt and deceive one another.

Jacob, having special status as the son of Laban's sister, tries to make a unique inside deal with his uncle. In exchange for seven years of work, he asks for hand of Laban's younger daughter Rachel in marriage. Perhaps blinded by love, Jacob misses the fact that Laban doesn't really accept the offer. This leaves Laban room to execute the ultimate "switcheroo" seven years later. The morning after the wedding celebration, Jacob wakes up to find that he is married not to Rachel, but to her older sister Leah. The fact that we are left wondering how Jacob could have been so dense – how he could fail to realize that the wrong woman was in his tent – just underscores the human frailty of the whole story. Jacob is left with a befuddled stream of questions:

"What have you done to me? Did I deserve this, after all I've done for you? **Why me?**"

Even though we might feel for him a little, we also feel like Jacob kind of deserves it. If you live by the con, you die by the con. But what about Leah? She ends up wed to a man who never wanted her, a man who is devastated to find that she is not her little sister. She must also have been deeply insulted by her father, who assumed that no one could ever want to marry her... who figured that the only way to get her out of the house would be to trick a man into taking her off of his hands. As the morning sun comes up, we can almost see the pain that must have been in her eyes... those eyes that no one could quite describe. The translation we read this morning says that "Leah's eyes were lovely," but most English versions have not been that kind. Some say that Leah's eyes were "weak," others that "there was no sparkle" in them. Still others said she was "dull-eyed." These translations leave the reader with the distinct impression that Leah was not much to look at. Even

if no one can really agree on whether Leah was pretty or ugly, there has never been any question about Rachel. Rachel was graceful. Rachel was beautiful. Rachel was the one that everyone loved, the one that everyone cherished, the one that everyone wanted.

Notably, Leah is not given any voice in this story. We do not know what she actually said in these painful moments, but it is not hard to imagine that she would have asked the same kind of questions that Jacob was asking: "What is happening? How can I possibly deserve this? **Why me?**"

This is the question that Rabbi Harold Kushner most wanted to answer when he wrote his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It was the question he had heard so many times in his ministry. He heard it from the middle-aged woman who had finally decided to start her own business, and spent six years traveling the world to acquire antiques for her store, only to have her largely uninsured collection destroyed by a fire caused by a random strike of lightning. He heard it from his parishioner Helen, a vibrant woman who had noticed her legs getting weaker, who then started falling unexpectedly, who was eventually diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, a disease that would go on to rob her of so much. It was the question that he himself was asking, as he tried to come to grips with the tragic death of his own son from a rare and debilitating disease.¹

It was the same question asked by my friend Kay a few years ago. Kay had been a loving and faithful caregiver after her husband suffered a series of strokes that left him wheelchair bound and almost completely dependent upon others. She devoted herself to his care for years. When he finally succumbed after continuing strokes, she thought she was due for a breather. But almost immediately, she got bad news of her own. The doctor had found cancer, and treatment needed to start as soon as possible. The chemotherapy was tough on her, but she fought hard, and it seemed to be working. A PET scan confirmed it, but within a week of her clear diagnosis, she took a nasty spill in the Chick-Fil-A parking lot. She tripped getting out of the car and landed on her face. Her nose was badly bruised and cut, and she cracked her wrist. And then, as her bruises were just beginning to fade, she learned that her cancer had returned and was spreading rapidly. During one visit, I distinctly remember her saying, "It feels like the world is out to get me. Why do these things keep happening to me?"

Humans have been asking these questions for thousands of years. Behind every "Why me?" is the assumption that there must be some justification for our suffering. From the ancient writing of the book of Job all the way up to modern blogs and websites, religious justifications for suffering have been basically the same... that we have somehow brought the pain upon ourselves as a natural consequence or a punishment for sin... that God is using our suffering to mold us or teach us something... that the suffering is somehow for our own good, even if we don't understand how... that God must want our suffering to speak or bear witness to others in some way.²

I have to say that I agree with Rabbi Kushner, who finds all of these so-called explanations unsatisfactory. All of them tend to separate us from God, because they call into question our beliefs that God is good, that God's actions are just and fair, that God is on our side. I was certainly unwilling to offer any of these explanations to Kay. It was not fair, all these things that were happening to her. She had done nothing to deserve her suffering. It was hard to imagine the lesson she was supposed to learn from it. All I could do was tell her how sorry I was, and try to reassure her that God was there for her, even as she was wondering whether that was really true.

Leah was no different. If Leah ever sinned or somehow earned the pain she endured around her marriage, we certainly do not know about it. If God was trying to teach her something, what could that possibly be? That pretty people win, and "dull-eyed" people should be happy with the

¹ Harold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Schocken Books (1981), pp. 1-21.

² "Why Me?" <https://bible.org/illustration/why-me>

leftovers? That cheaters prosper? That she was just supposed to take her lumps without complaint? Leah had to be wondering where God was in all of this, because God sure didn't seem to be showing up for her.

Interestingly enough, if we read this passage closely, we see that God seems completely absent from it. God is never mentioned, not even once.³ It's almost as if God, having given such a strong statement to Jacob in his ladder dream, has now left the stage altogether, leaving the human players to act out the drama in any way they wish.

So, how does Rabbi Kushner ultimately answer this vexing question of why bad things happen to good people? To be honest, he never does. Leaning on the wisdom of Job, Kushner recognizes that we cannot know why suffering exists, or why it seems to strike so unfairly. As Job observed so many years ago, God lives, breathes, works and redeems in heights, depths, widths and ways that we can never fully understand. So, instead of asking why God is allowing these things to happen -- instead of asking "Why me?" -- Kushner recommends that we do two things.

First, the rabbi believes that God's people should make a bold but necessary theological step. Most of the explanations of suffering rest on the assumption that God controls everything that happens. According to this assumption, if someone dies, it must have been God's will. If we get a disease, we must deserve it, because God would not allow it otherwise. In his own life, however, Kushner came to a point where he could no longer hold onto the idea that God causes and wills everything that happens. He could not believe that God willed the Holocaust to happen. He could not believe that God wanted his son to die so early. Some bad things, he decided, just happen.

Second, Kushner recommends that we start asking a question other than "Why me?" Instead of seeking explanations for inexplicable suffering, Kushner suggests that our turn to God say something akin to this: "Lord, see what is happening to me. Recognize my pain. Hear my cries. Can You help me? Will You help me?"⁴

Perhaps this is why we do not hear Leah's voice in this earliest days of her marriage. If she ever did ask the question "Why me?" we do not know about it. We do, however, have good evidence that she did ask Rabbi Kushner's question. Instead of dwelling on the why, Leah did eventually move beyond blaming God. She chose instead to say, "God, please see what is happening to me. See that I am unloved. See that I am in pain. Can You help me? Will You help me?"

As soon as she does this, the story immediately begins to turn. "*When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved,*" the scripture says, "*he opened her womb... Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, 'Because the LORD has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.'*"⁵

And she was right. Jacob did love her, and she would go on to bear him five more sons: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun. Through her servant, Zilpah, Gad and Asher would join them. Instead of asking why she was made to suffer, Leah called upon a God who always hears the cries of his people, a God who does see, and who does help, a God who blessed Leah so much that seventy-five percent (75%) of the ancestry of Israel would be born through her.⁶

Whenever we are tempted, in our own suffering, to ask the question "Why me?" Kushner leaves us with this conclusion:

"If we can bring ourselves to acknowledge that there are some things God does not control, many good things become possible. We will be able to turn to God for things He can do to help us, instead of holding on to unrealistic expectations of Him which

³ *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year A*, Fred B. Craddock, et al. eds. Philadelphia: Trinity Press (1992), p. 375.

⁴ Kushner, p. 44.

⁵ Genesis 29:31-2.

⁶ *Preaching*, p. 375.

will never come about... We can maintain our own self-respect and sense of goodness without having to feel that God has judged us and condemned us. We can be angry at what has happened to us without feeling that we are angry at God... Instead of feeling that we are opposed to God, we can feel that... when we cry out, we are still on God's side, and [God] is still on ours."⁷

So, even though God is not mentioned in this passage, Rabbi Kushner helps us understand that God is still present with this seemingly dysfunctional family. It is, after all, exactly what God promised Jacob in his dream: that God would remain with Jacob and his family until every promise was delivered. With Kushner's help, we can avoid the trap of blaming God for the bad things that happen to us. We do not have to understand Leah's plight as a punishment or harsh life lesson from God. We do not have to try to justify or injustice. We can see God for who God really is -- One who does not cause our pain but shares in it; One who cries with us, gets angry with us, and hates unfairness with us; One who does not create the darkness but is still willing to walk dark valleys with us; and One who always stands ready to redeem something good from our pain as soon as we call.

Thanks be to God for being that kind of "God with us." **Amen.**

⁷ Kushner, p. 45.