

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 It Doesn't Make Sense!

A common experience at The Home Depot was to be made aware of something that didn't make sense. THD carried products but not their replacement parts; light fixtures but not the specialty light bulbs they required. In one case they carried a pump that had a part sold separately without which it wouldn't work, and they did not sell the part. The pump was useless. Sometimes there were lectures from customers who could not understand how a business run that way could make a profit. Sometimes we the employees complained. "That doesn't make sense," was a commonly heard refrain.

One day I overheard a conversation between a mother and what appeared to be a teenaged daughter. It was hard not to overhear the conversation because they were yelling at each other. "That's not fair," the young girl complained. "Life's not always fair and you are just going to have to learn to deal with it," was the reply. Life is not always fair. That is just another way of saying that life doesn't make sense. Part of growing up is learning how to cope with life's inequities in a healthy way.

One is reminded of the, "serenity prayer," often attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr,

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Life Should Be Fair

In the middle of our attempts to accept what we cannot change and change the things we can lies an instinctive conviction that we should not have things in life like that. Life should be fair. When it isn't, it doesn't make sense. There is an almost universal human instinct that life should make sense.

The first Psalm is a good expression of this conviction. It simply distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked and proclaims that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will perish. Anyone with their eyes open can see that this conviction of the essential fairness of things is not always true in this life.

Sometimes the righteous suffer.
Sometimes the wicked prosper.

There are some who act with integrity, work hard, are kind and generous and honest, and suffer bad luck. Conversely, others are not so generous or kind or honest or hard working who stumble on to good fortune. While we must confess a general truth that in many ways working hard and being good does pay off even *in* this life; and that extreme dishonesty and violence does not pay, not really, one cannot escape the disconnect between the conviction that life should be fair and make sense, and the reality we face.

A Little Soul-Searching

According to Frederick Buechner, Albert Camus, the 20th century existentialist philosopher and writer defined this disconnect and called it the Doctrine of the Absurd, “the coming together of the insatiable human longing for life to make sense and life’s inexorable refusal to do so.”

Each one of us is confronted by this contradiction at some point in our lives and when we are there are options:

Denial - just try to live as though it isn’t so. Refuse to admit the contradiction.

Despair - submit to the implication that life is meaningless and become cynical, angry, contrary, and inconsolable.

Searching - A little soul searching is in good order. “Ask and you shall receive,” the scriptures say, “seek and you shall find.” “Seek God and live,” we learn from the prophet Amos. This searching is clearly the best option even though it is a bit risky. The bible is the product of that soul-searching.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Is it to teach them, to discipline them, to mold and shape them?

Life *Is* Fair After All

The searching has led to some discoveries about God and about human nature. Among them in Christian thought are the Doctrine of Original Sin and The Goodness of God. People who search are confronted with the fact of their own sinfulness. “No one is good, not even one.” Therefore bad things don’t happen to good people. God is just to let us live in a world that doesn’t make sense. What Moses taught turns out to be true. People chose disobedience and that explains our experience. In the end life turns out to be devastatingly fair.

What Moses Taught

After Moses gave the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel, he went before the people with the following choice; “Love the Lord and keep his commands and you will live long in the land and prosper. Disobey and you will be destroyed.” “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction . . . this day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, that you and your children may live.”

The tradition from Moses was passed down to people and by people who were trying to explain the decline and eventual destruction of Israel. They conclude that the reason for their demise is that they chose disobedience instead of obedience, death instead of life. They broke the commandments. That is the simple answer and it is easy to give. They chose not to

love the Lord and not to love their neighbor and not to be obedient to the commands and that choice explains the trouble in the world. That is the easy answer and it seems like it makes sense. But there is no gospel in that.

It Doesn't Make Sense

It is best to see the giving of the Ten Commandments and this "choice" Moses offers as if it comes, not before the soul-searching, as a kind of life-premise that turns out not to be true, but after the soul-searching. It came after 40 years in the wilderness, after the people had danced around the golden calf, after they had sent spies into the land of promise and decided they could not inhabit the land, not even with God's help. It came after, not before, their epic failure.

And it comes as a word of grace and acceptance so good that one is forced to conclude, ironically, that it doesn't make sense after all.

Good things happen to bad people all the time, everyday;

Every breath we take
Every sunrise and sunset
The sound of children playing
Every cool breeze
Falling in love
Birth
Going away on an adventure
Coming home again
Beautiful music, beautiful anything

Tears of joy

Every good thing that happens is an undeserved gift, grace. It is not necessary that these things should happen, but they do. Everyone has an experience of goodness.

And the goodness stretches even farther. One does not have to live up to some unattainable standard of goodness to receive good things, life is undeserved. All that is necessary is believe in it, search for it, give thanks for it when it finds us, and return the love that has been given; and pray and hope and help, so that others might see it too.

Let us remember that our goodness is the product of Grace and Faith working together. To the extent that we achieve anything good, we are not good *so that* we can be blessed. We are good *because* we have been blessed.

And when we contemplate that acceptance, we can not make any sense of it, given who we are and what we have done, but instead of treating the senselessness as a bad thing, confusing and frustrating; we see it as a *good* thing filled with wonder, replete with joy, leading to gratitude, hope, and love, the foundation of a Christian optimism that never gives up on people or the search for excellence or for the solutions to difficult problems because no matter how little it makes sense the Grace of God is like an umbrella over everything we do.

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