

Why do bad things happen? Part 2

A woman I know really well, Maggie, has cancer, and this isn't the first time she has wrestled with it. About 10 years ago she was told she had breast cancer. She underwent chemotherapy, radiation and surgery.

She was good for a number of years – then – one day – she was told she had cervical cancer. She underwent chemotherapy, radiation and surgery. Recently she was told she has a different type of cancer – I am not even sure what type she has now.

When told she has cancer again, do you know what her response was? “I think I still have that red head scarf I wore from the last time I lost my hair – I hope I didn't get rid of it.” She followed that up by saying, “I hope they give me the same type of chemo they did last time – that one didn't bother me too much.”

Just a little over 12 years ago another woman I knew very well, Gloria, was diagnosed with cancer and told she needed radiation, chemotherapy and possibly surgery if she lived that long. The first thing she said to her husband after receiving this news was, “Goodbye” and then, about 7 months later, my mom died.

Same disease – but two different reactions. One person gave up while the other person had hope.

I am not saying my mom died because she didn't have hope, but it did affect how she lived those last 7 months of her life.

Looking at both woman's lives, they both had something to be hopeful for – they both had loving children, some of which were still in school when they were diagnosed with cancer, they both had loving husbands, they both had good careers, they both had decent insurance. But one had hope and the other one didn't.

This makes me wonder, why did Maggie have so much hope when my mom didn't have much hope at all? Knowing both women well, I can tell you there was one main difference: Maggie put her faith in God. I am sure she asked God why this was happening to her, a woman in her early fifties getting cancer for the third time. But she didn't lose hope that God would be there for her.

Did she expect a miraculous healing? No. Did she expect God to eliminate the cancer because she went to church every Sunday? No. Did she hope she would be okay – I am sure she did.

Maggie trusted that God would not forget about her and asked Him to give her and her family the strength to work through this – no matter what the outcome would be.

Hope is important in our lives - we need to know that we have something to be hopeful for.

For many of us here in this room, we have placed our hope in God. Hope that if something does happen to us, he will not leave us alone. But at the same time we do realize that, as thinking people, as intelligent people, that bad things can still happen to us.

In the scripture that Barry read for us, Job was remembering the days that he felt blessed by God, of the days that he was on top of the world – but the world had fallen apart beneath him. Almost everyone he cared about had died, all of his earthly possessions were gone, and now he was suffering from a disease.

Hard times and diseases don't discriminate. For example, cancer doesn't care if you are white, black, purple, or pink. It doesn't care if you are rich or poor. It doesn't care if you go to church or not. Cancer, like many other diseases, for one reason or another, exists in this world. We don't have any guarantees that we won't get it.

Sure, our lifestyle may increase or decrease our odds of getting sick. Like the guy who smokes three packs of cigarettes a day for 60 years – he really shouldn't turn around and blame God for giving him cancer.

So our lifestyle can help us reduce the risk of cancer, diabetes, and heart disease, but changing our lifestyle doesn't guarantee that we won't get sick. We've all heard of the person that gets lung cancer who had never smoked a cigarette a day in her life or had even been around anyone that smokes.

Even today, scientists say they can look at our DNA and tell us if we have a certain gene in our bodies that may lead to cancer, or some other disease ... but they can't tell us for certain if we are going to get that disease.

Last week we said that when bad things happen to us it isn't because God is punishing us; and now this week we are saying that it seems that things "just happen."

So in a world where natural disasters "just happen", some people "just happen" to hurt other people, and certain diseases "just happen" to inflict loved ones, it may make us wonder – is there really a God?

I am sure that went through my mom's mind – Is there really a God? Why was this happening to her? Why did she have to get cancer?

For many people they believe that because there is suffering in this world, because there are so many diseases, because bad things happen to people, there isn't a God.

But I believe just the opposite. I believe that when we stand there looking down at the grave of a loved one, we have hope knowing that God is standing on the other side taking their hand. When someone like my friend Maggie gets a terrible disease like cancer, she puts her hope in the love of Jesus Christ.

God is in the world, God is with us every step of the way. He doesn't cause bad things to happen to us, and I believe he weeps with us when they do happen.

But we don't have a powerless God. We have a powerful God who is alive today in this world.

As we said last week, God doesn't simply change the rules of nature that he put in place since the beginning of time. He doesn't reverse gravity because someone jumped out of a building, he doesn't take away our free will because we might hurt someone, and he doesn't change storm patterns because someone decided to build their home in a flood area.

But I think God is still here with us – giving us the strength when times are hard, giving others the heart to help in times of need, working in our lives to help us grow in our love for others.

I think that sometimes when bad things do happen to us, God helps us to use them for the greater good. For example, many people who have hit bottom with drugs or alcohol have found God, turned their lives around and now work with troubled youth or work with other addicts helping them turn around.

My friend Maggie has been there for many people when they were going through chemotherapy. She isn't afraid to sit there with them when they were getting sick, she isn't afraid to hear their stories, she isn't afraid.

I have heard of other people who have survived diseases help with the Make a Wish Foundation. I know of adults who had a neglected childhood turn around and become a Big Brother or a Big Sister. I have heard of people that have had many miscarriages turn around and adopt a child.

God is present in our hearts before, during, and after tragedies. We just need to try to open our hearts and find the strength and guidance he has for us. Although bad things do happen, our attitude makes the difference. Although we might feel terrible, might not understand what is going on, we should try to remember that with God's help, something good can come out of it.

When we feel like the world is caving in around us, instead of giving up like my mom did, we need to open our eyes and look around and see what we have going for us – looking at the blessings we have in our lives. Maggie knows today that she has had a great life with a great family. She knows she has already beaten this deadly disease twice.

For years theologians have been trying to explain the question, “Why do bad things happen?” and they haven't come up with an answer that everyone fully accepts. So we simply call it the mystery of creation – the mystery of the world we live in.

Life is a mystery – one that we will never have all of the answers to.

It is important to remember that we continue to have hope in a God that loves us, hope in an afterlife, hope in a God that sent his only Son to pay for our transgressions, and our continued hope of God's presence and grace to always be with us – to embrace us, to comfort us.

We also know that every once in a while a miracle happens. We have no idea why, but we hear of people that are in car accidents where everyone died but one person didn't receive a scratch. We hear about people who have had cancer for 15 years, then one day they wake up and they are cancer free.

I can't explain these, nor would I try to, except to say they are truly miracles. I don't know how they happen and I don't know why they happen, I just know they happen.

My friend Maggie isn't praying for any large miracle. She isn't even praying for a small miracle. My friend Maggie is simply praying that her sons and husband have the strength and courage to endure what lies ahead. She keeps her hope in a loving God, and in the knowledge that someday in the future she will be in a place without disease, without famine, without war – someplace filled with love and grace.

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