

The Creative Universe and the Creating God

Chapter 1. Why Me?

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Almost everyone experiences tragedy and misfortunes in the course of his or her life. When a person is struck by tragedy, he or she goes through periods of suffering and anguish.

An innocent baby crawling around his house finds an extension cord with one end plugged into a wall outlet and the other end unconnected. As any baby would do, he puts the open end into his mouth, and his saliva completes the circuit, shocking and burning him. Hearing the baby's screams, his mother runs to the scene and yanks out the extension cord. But irreparable damage has already been done: his tongue and lips are injured beyond repair, and he will never be able to talk. The mother cries in torment, "Why didn't I watch my baby more closely? I should have noticed the extension cord. If my older boy had not tripped over the extension cord that was connected to the toaster, it would have not been disconnected, and this tragedy would not have happened. Why did such a terrible thing happen to me? Why did it happen to my baby?" The baby will grow asking the same kind of question.

This story is based on a real-life event. Such tragedies are not rare, and less severe tragedies happen even more frequently. You must have experienced a misfortune or two in your own life. You may have experienced the untimely loss of a family member in a car accident or in a terrorist bombing. Your family member may have maimed by a random drive-by shooting. Someone close to you may have contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion. Someone close to you may have died of cancer in the prime of life. If you have not experienced a tragedy like this yourself, you must know someone who has. Why do such tragedies happen? How we cope with suffering is closely tied to how we answer this question.

A person who lives to an old age without experiencing tragedy is very rare and lucky, but, in a sense, unlucky. When you meet such a person, you are likely to regard him or her as deficient in understanding human suffering. I have experienced tragedy and gone through a period of torment. Therefore, this book is not just the result of pedagogic speculation of an idle scientist, but the result of soul searching by a person who has struggled to cope with a personal tragedy.

Why Me?

My son, Samuel, was born on March 20, 1977. At the time, I was busy finishing up my Ph.D. thesis in physics. I came to the United States in February, 1972, to attend graduate school at the University of Maryland. After five years of hard work, I was at the last stage, polishing my thesis before the oral defense scheduled for April 16th.

My oral defense went well, although I had a debate with one professor on the exam committee. The graduation ceremony was on May 14th. I was very happy. I had achieved what I had aimed to achieve, five years after arriving at the Dulles International Airport with three hundred dollars in my pocket, a suitcase, and some proficiency in written English but little mastery of spoken English. Furthermore, my wife had just given a birth to a son. (We were still under the influence of a culture preferring a son as the first child.) I also obtained a research associate position at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, where I had done my thesis research. My wife and I were at a peak of happiness.

However, we soon fell into a deep valley of despair. We learned— rather, finally, had to accept—that our son Sammy had Down's syndrome. The pediatrician who had checked Sammy at birth had told me that he might have Down's syndrome, and recommended a blood sample be taken for a chromosome test. He added, however, that he could have mistaken the features of Asian babies as those of Down's syndrome babies. The prospect of having a child with Down's syndrome was so horrible to me that I did not mention the doctor's suspicion to my wife, and I immediately suppressed it from my consciousness. Furthermore, Dr. Kim (first name withheld), whom we had chosen as Sammy's pediatrician, told me that he was sure that Sammy did not have Down's syndrome. (In retrospect, either he was very considerate to postpone the bad news, or he was afraid to tell the truth.)

However, on Memorial Day, May 30, 1977, I began to accept the dreadful fact. That day my wife had taken Sammy to a shopping mall. He must have contracted pneumonia there. At night he breathed heavily and his chest caved in. I took him to Prince George's County Hospital. There they shaved a part of his scalp and inserted an I.V. needle in a blood vessel in his head, and taped a styrofoam cup over the needle to protect it from the baby's randomly moving hands. He looked so grotesque that I almost accepted at that moment that he might have Down's syndrome. Some interns showed up and insensitively asked whether the baby had Down's syndrome. Sensing that these interns came to see what a Down's syndrome baby looked like, I resented their questions.

The next day, I went to the main library of the University of Maryland. Because the Medical School of the University of Maryland is in Baltimore, the main library in College Park did not have many books on medicine. I found a book on Mongolism and a book on genetic disorders. Both had been written in the 1950s. (Down's syndrome used to be called Mongolism because some of the physical characteristics of Down's syndrome children were thought to be similar to those of Mongoloid children, such as a low nose bridge and epicanthic folds at the eyes. However, because this term suggests racial prejudice, from the 1970s onward the condition has been called Down's syndrome, after the British doctor John Langdon Down (1828–96) who performed the first major study of this syndrome.)

The descriptions of Down's syndrome children were so grim that I could not but cry while reading. According to these books, the average life span of Down's syndrome children was only ten years because they suffered from one infectious disease after another, and their I.Q.s decreased

with age. Formerly, in the United States, retarded children such as Down's syndrome children were taken from their parents at birth and were institutionalized. The studies in these books had been based on institutionalized Down's syndrome children. Considering that even some normal children have become highly deficient after being institutionalized, we can easily imagine the developmental conditions of institutionalized Down's syndrome children. However, I did not know this at the time. I checked the books out, but I hid them from my wife because I did not know how to break the news.

A week or so later, the blood test result came, and it was positive. (Because the first blood culture had failed, the blood culture for Sammy's chromosome test had to be done again. This was why it took almost three months to get the test result.) Still, I could not fully accept the fact and thought it could be a mistake. But I decided that it was the right time to break the news to my wife. We went to see Dr. Rosenbaum, the genetic specialist at Children's Hospital in Washington, D.C. He introduced us to a book entitled *The Child with Down's Syndrome*, written in 1973 by Dr. D. W. Smith.[1] This book was modern not only in date but also in philosophy, unlike the books I had borrowed from the University of Maryland. What mattered to me most was this book's main point—that a Down's syndrome child could live a meaningful life. Before reading this book, I had a mental image that a Down's syndrome child was like some kind of monster.

Down's syndrome is caused by the existence of three number-21 chromosomes in human cells. Each normal human cell has 46 chromosomes (two sets of 23). Two of them are sex chromosomes: XX for women and XY for men. The remaining 22 pairs are numbered according to their sizes. Therefore, a number-21 chromosome is one of the smallest chromosomes. At conception, one set of 23 chromosomes comes from the father's sperm and the other set from the mother's egg. Therefore, a fertilized egg normally starts with 46 chromosomes. For one reason or another, some fertilized eggs have more or less than 46 chromosomes. This is a kind of genetic disorder. Usually, a fetus with this kind of genetic disorder does not develop to become a full-term baby, but is miscarried. However, the effect of trisomy 21 (the medical term for having three number-21 chromosomes in each cell) is relatively small compared to other kinds of trisomy, because a number-21 chromosome has little genetic material. Therefore, a fetus with trisomy 21 develops fully, but trisomy 21 still causes severe mental and physical retardation.

Although Dr. Smith's book gave us more hope than before, we were still in anguish. I anguished mainly because I thought I had failed. But the failure was not caused by a mistake of mine but by something beyond my control. I had failed to achieve a happy family. The stereotypic picture of a happy family does not include a retarded child. In retrospect, I worried more about what other people would think than about how we would raise a severely retarded child. I was proud: I had taken pride in being a good student, and I took pride in being intelligent and in having obtained a Ph.D. degree. Having a retarded son was against all the things I had strived for. I had worked hard to earn a Ph.D. degree, overcoming cultural shock, language barriers, and a five-year gap between my undergraduate and graduate schooling. I did my part as well as I could, but something beyond my control had ruined my dream. My sense of helplessness and frustration was very difficult to

endure.

I had dreamed of returning to Korea to say, “I went to America alone almost empty handed, but now I am back with my family and my Ph.D. diploma.” I had wanted to “go back home in silk clothes” (an East Asian expression for returning home triumphantly after succeeding in the wide world). But my dream had been shattered. I did not want to return as a defeated man. I did not have the nerve to go home and say to my family and relatives in Korea, “Here is my Ph.D. diploma, for which I worked hard. Here is my son, who is, by the way, retarded.” I could not face the disappointment that this news would cause. We even stopped writing to our families in Korea. We did not want to break the awful news in a letter, but we also did not want to deceive by writing without telling the most important news.

We all know that tragedies occur daily or hourly to people everywhere. You know it as a fact of life; but when you face tragedy yourself, objective knowledge does not relieve the anguish. When tragedy strikes, your first reaction is to deny it, like an ostrich burying its head in the sand. I did just that for two months from Sammy’s birth to Memorial Day, 1977. However, as reality sinks in, you ask in anguish, “What did I do wrong? Why me? Why did such a bad thing happen to me?”

Addressing the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” is one of the key subjects of this book.

Is Tragedy God’s Punishment?

Because tragedies happen frequently, it is important to know how to deal with them emotionally. How one copes with tragedy makes or breaks the person. If you become bitter and succumb to the weight of the grief, you will be broken. If you overcome the adversity, you will have become a more mature person, even though you may bear the scar all your life. How you interpret human tragedy in general influences how you cope with your own. It also influences how you deal with your friends and neighbors who suffer tragedy. Therefore, the interpretation of human suffering is at the heart of religious thoughts. For example, in Buddhism and other religions that teach incarnation of the soul through different worlds, human suffering is regarded as punishment for the wrongdoings of one’s previous lives. Other religions that do not teach reincarnation tend to take the view that punishment for people’s sins is meted out either during the current life or in the next life.

In religious traditions, the concept that a misfortune is God’s punishment is widespread. When confronted with a tragedy, one tends to ask, “What did I do to deserve this? Is this a punishment for something I have done?” The children of divorcing parents sometimes blame themselves. “If only I had acted differently, they would not end up having a divorce.” When her grandfather dies, a small child sometimes thinks that something she has done has caused his death. When someone is struck by lightning, the traditional interpretation is that he is punished by God.

Because belief in life after death was not strong in Old Testament times, Jews believed in punishment in the current life. That is why they burned offerings to avoid punishment for their sins. Is tragedy really God’s punishment? This is exactly the question that is debated in the Book

of Job in the Old Testament. Job was the richest person in the east, with 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys, and a large household. Suddenly, Job lost all his children and all his possessions, and he was plagued with skin infections on top of it. Yet he rejected the idea that his suffering was God’s punishment. Instead, he cursed the day of his birth:

May the day of my birth perish,
and the night it was said, “A boy is born!”
That day—may it turn to darkness;
may God above not care about it;
may no light shine upon it.
May darkness and deep shadow claim it once more;
may a cloud settle over it;
may blackness overwhelm its light. (Job 3:35)

He even wished that he had been still born:

Why did I not perish at birth,
and die as I came from the womb? (Job 3:11)

Three friends of Job—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—came to comfort Job and stayed with him for seven days and seven nights without a word. It was an admirable act. But they began to accuse Job, insisting that his suffering must be a result of God’s punishment for his sins. Eliphaz began his accusation:

Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?
Where were the upright ever destroyed?
Even as I have observed, those who plow evil
and those who sow trouble reap it.
By the breath of God they are destroyed;
at the blast of His anger they perish. (Job 4:79)

He continued,

Can a mortal be more righteous than God?
Can a man be more pure than his Maker? (Job 4:17)

Job contested the accusation:

Teach me, and I will be quiet;
show me where I have been wrong. (Job 6:24)

...

If I have sinned, what I have done to you,
O, watcher of men? (Job 7:20)

Bildad, another friend of Job, also accused him by asking: “Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?” (Job 8:3) Zophar, the third friend, accused Job even more harshly: “Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin.” (Job 11:6)

Job still insisted on his innocence. He conceded that he was not righteous by saying, “Indeed, I know this is true. But how can a mortal be righteous before God?” (Job 9:2) But he rejected the notion that he was so corrupt to be singled out for the punishment, by saying, “My face is red with weeping, deep shadows ring my eyes; yet my hands have been free of violence and my prayer is pure.” (Job 16:16-17)

Here, Job’s friends’ accusations are based on two premises. First, God is almighty. Second, God is just. In addition to these, the observed fact is that Job is suffering. If God is almighty, He is not just, because He allowed an innocent man like Job to suffer harshly. If He is just, He should have prevented an innocent man from suffering. But He did not. Thus, He is not almighty. A logical way out of the dilemma is either to abandon one of the two premises or to admit that Job is guilty. They chose the latter.

After hearing exchanges between Job, his friends, and Elihu, God appeared to arbitrate:

Then, the Lord answered Job out of the storm.

He said:

Who is this that darkens my counsel
with words without knowledge?

Brace yourself like a man;

I will question you,
and you shall answer me.

Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? (Job 38:24)

...

Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades?

Can you loose the cords of Orion? (Job 38:31)

...

Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?

Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn? (Job 39:1)

God did not explain why Job had to suffer. Instead He made Job understand His omnipotence as the Creator. Although Job did not understand why he had to suffer, he realized it was not proper for a mortal like him to question God’s providence:

I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?
I put my hand over my mouth.
I spoke once, but I have no answer—
twice, but I will say no more. (Job 40:4–5)

However, God rejected the thesis that Job was suffering because of his sin, by scolding Eliphaz and his two friends:

I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. (Job 42:78)

Let us consider the mistakes made by Job’s friends. First, they tried to judge God with human logic. “He should have done this, if He is almighty. Because He did not do so, He is not almighty.” This kind of logic shows that they know what God should do. Second, by accusing Job, they implied that they were more righteous than Job. If we reverse the argument that Job was suffering for his sins, then they were not suffering because they were righteous. The I-am-holier-than-thou attitude in the presence of a suffering person should be certainly avoided.

Clearly, the Book of Job denies that Job’s tragedy is God’s punishment for his sins. However, Elihu, who argued that a tragedy sometimes meant God’s punishment,[2] was not scolded by God. Therefore, Elihu’s claim is partly justified in the Book of Job.

In the New Testament, disciples of Jesus raised the same question upon seeing a man who was blind from birth.

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” (John 9:13)

It is interesting to note here how the disciples phrased the question, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” They firmly believed that the affliction of blindness must be God’s punishment for someone’s sin. Because he was blinded from birth, before having any time to commit sin, they were curious. If the man had been blinded after his birth, they would have not felt the need to ask the question.

In the story above, Jesus denied that the blind man was blind due to his or his parents’ sin. However, one can wonder from Jesus’s answer whether God blinded him on purpose to reveal His work. Especially, considering that Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one

of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”[3] Is tragedy the result of a deliberate act of God?

The belief that God causes us to suffer in order to train our souls is also widespread. Here is a true story: David, who was deacon of a church, had lately not been so devout. One day, one of his legs was fractured in a traffic accident. Interpreting this accident as God’s punishment for his lack of faith, he became a more devout Christian after it. Telling this story, the minister of this church preached to his congregation how God worked wondrously.

Can we accept this view? Would the minister then pray to God that He break John’s leg next time to make him more faithful? Are we willing to believe in a God who maims people just to make them attend church more regularly?

The views above hold that God causes human suffering as a punishment for our sins, or out of love. There is a different view which interprets misfortune as being due to fate or destiny. This Chinese story expresses a popular belief about destiny: One day the parents of a boy were told by a fortune teller that the boy was fated to be drowned on the first day of the next month. They were told to take precautions. When the fateful day came, the father made sure that the boy stayed in his room, reading a book. The back door of the room was locked, and the front door was guarded by the watchful father, who worked in the front yard. When the mother opened the door to call the boy to lunch, she found him dead. His head had fallen on the book, and his nose was exactly over the Chinese character for water.

This story tells you that you cannot escape your destiny. Even if you can evade your destiny for a while, it will catch you up. Toward the end of the 19.. motion picture *Star Wars: Episode VI Return of the Jedi*, Luke Skywalker confronts the Emperor of the Evil Empire and Darth Vader, who turns out to be Luke’s own father. The Emperor urges Luke to join the Evil Empire by telling that it is his destiny. Luke resists it and engages in a fight with his own father. After Darth Vader is defeated, the Emperor again urges Luke to join him by saying, “Fulfill your destiny! Take your father’s place on my side.” Upon hearing this, Skywalker is shaken. In this film, as in other modern fictions, the theme of destiny plays an important role in secular mythology.

Why This Book?

How to interpret Job’s suffering led directly to debates on the attributes of God. Thus, our interpretation of human suffering depends directly on our view of God. But traditional views of God are often inadequate for a person overwhelmed by suffering. In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,[4] Rabbi Harold Kushner tells this story: One day the Rabbi heard that the daughter of one of the members of his synagogue had died while in college because an artery in her brain had suddenly burst. (Such deaths are unusual but they are medically documented.) Upon hearing the news, he visited the grieving father. The first sentence the father uttered was, “Rabbi, I did not fast during the last Yom Kippur.” Why did the father say that? Although he might not have been firmly convinced, he must have toyed with the thought that his daughter’s death was

God's punishment for his failure to observe the religious ritual. How cruel and unforgiving such a God is! With such a view of God, his faith must have given him an extra burden instead of needed help. He must have felt guilty about his daughter who had died tragically for his sin; and he must also have felt angry and bitter toward God, but must have suppressed those feelings in fear of God.

When I was struck by adversity in 1977, I did not accept it as God's punishment. I said to my wife, "Living with a severely handicapped child will be difficult enough. To be riddled with guilt would give us an extra burden." However, I could not avoid the bitter feeling that God had not done anything to prevent the tragedy. "Almighty God must have known that my son was going to be inflicted with Down's syndrome, but He did not prevent it. If He is almighty, it must be in His power to do so. But He did not. Why?" I could not pray to the God who had allowed such a tragedy to occur. I went to church every Sunday, as usual, to feign normalcy, but not to seek comfort in church. I did not talk about my son to the minister of my church until several months later, thinking, "If God could not do anything to prevent the child's genetic disorder, what can a minister do?" My wife stopped going to church. I gave the excuse that she had not yet recovered from the complications of childbirth.

Looking back, we did not have adequate support systems. Our families were too far away to provide emotional support. On the contrary, how to break the news to them was a burden to us. We did not talk about our problems to our friends, except for a few, because we felt shameful of the problems. We did not seek support from the church we attended. In retrospect, my faith did not help me much at the time of greatest need because my view of God was flawed.

How we interpret human adversity is directly linked to how we overcome it. It is also linked to how we treat our friends and neighbors who are suffering. I still recall this story from a Chinese movie I have seen many years ago: One poor young man died of illness, leaving a wife and a son. While the widow was grieving, her son wandered into the wooded area near the house and was killed by a tiger. On top of these two tragedies, yet another struck her. She had borrowed money to buy medicine for her sick husband. Now, with the man of the house dead, the creditor thought it unlikely that she would make enough money to repay the debt soon. So he took her house—more precisely, a shack. All of a sudden, she had lost her husband, her son, and her home.

She went to a wealthy house in the village to work as a housemaid. An extra hand was welcome, because the ancestor-worship day for that house happened to be near. Having found a place to stay, she worked diligently, washing dishes in preparation for the holy day and doing other chores. But the man of the house summoned his wife to inform her that the newly-hired housemaid was unlucky and "unclean" because she had been dealt with harshly by fate. He said, "Letting her handle the dishes for the ancestor worship ceremony shows disrespect to our ancestors." So the woman was asked by the housewife not to handle the dishes. She was puzzled at first, but she slowly began to understand the reason and left the house.

Is tragedy a result of God's will? Or is it a destiny? Or is it a chance happening? In order to answer these questions, we should have a comprehensive world view which tells us how the universe

works and how human beings are related to the universe and God. I devote the bulk of this book to discussions of the characteristics of the universe and human beings. After that I discuss the attributes of God that are compatible with our views of the universe and human beings. Then, at the end, we come back to the important questions above.

Notes and References

1. Smith, D. W., and A. A., Wilson. *The Child with Down's Syndrome*. Philadelphia: Saunders, 1973.
2. Job 42:7-8.
3. Matt. 10:29-30.
4. Kushner, H. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Avon, 1981.