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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

THE STRANGE STRATEGY OF LOVE

By Ron Allen

Famines find frequent mention in the Bible. It was on account of a particularly severe famine in Canaan that Jacob took his whole household down to Egypt. That is how his descendants came to be slaves in that country.

Another famine in Judea forced the temporary exile of Elimelech and Naomi from their Bethlehem home. They went to Moab. When Elimelech and his two sons had died, Naomi returned to Bethlehem along with her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Ruth later became the wife of Boaz, and thereby took her place in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. The harshness of drought was incorporated into salvation history.

Other inconveniences and damaging events are recorded in the Bible. For that reason, Amos, the fourth chapter, begs for our attention.

*I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, **yet you have not returned to me**, declares the Lord. I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up. People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink. **Yet you have not returned to me**, declares the Lord. Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees. **Yet you have not returned to me**, declares the Lord. I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt. I killed your young men with the sword, along with your captured horses. I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps. **Yet you have not returned to me**, declares the Lord. I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire. **Yet you have not returned to me**, declares the Lord (Amos 4:6-12).*

Amos sets before Israel a catalog of trouble. Chief among them are catastrophes familiar to agrarian people—crop failure, water shortage, crop disease and the destruction wrought by insect pests.

Most of us live in an urban environment and are removed from direct experience of these traumas. But there are other

calamities mentioned, some of which have touched our lives. Disasters wrought by upheavals in nature; the horrors of war, the massed dead, life, and property wasted.

Amos supplies us with a register of things that commonly curse mankind. It is not a complete list; it doesn't have to be. It's sufficient to get our attention. It is a reminder of God's words to Adam and Eve when they were expelled from



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paradise: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field” (Genesis 3:17, 18).

The world's thinkers, wise men, poets, and philosophers have noted and wrestled with the essentially problematic nature of existence. Ernest Hemingway said: “The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken

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EDITORIAL . . .

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done; the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20).

For nearly twenty years, Michael Henchard, the Mayor of Casterbridge, had worked hard to become a successful corn merchant. He enjoyed not just material prosperity, but the respect and admiration of the townsfolk. But when Donald Farfrae came, things changed. Whereas Farfrae couldn't seem to put a foot wrong, ill-luck plagued the fortunes of Michael Henchard. First, he lost the Mayoralty. Then, his businesses all failed and he was obliged to sell all to Donald Farfrae, and depend on him for employment. Further to his mortification, he had to seek lodging among the poor.

During these dark and bitter days, Henchard fell to brooding over the sudden turn in his fortunes. He felt that a demon fate was toying with him; killing him inch by inch; that he was in the grip of conspiratorial forces that meant to crush him.

When Jacob's ten eldest sons arrived in Egypt to buy grain, Joseph—whom they had tried to destroy twenty years before—now had his tormenters in his grasp. What to do? All those years of unjust imprisonment and torment rose up before him. Yet, he did not take his revenge. Instead, he manipulated them so that the full horror of their long-secret crime came back to haunt them. They relived their tyranny and guilt.

Though they did not at first recognize Joseph, they felt they were being punished for what they had done to him. “Now we

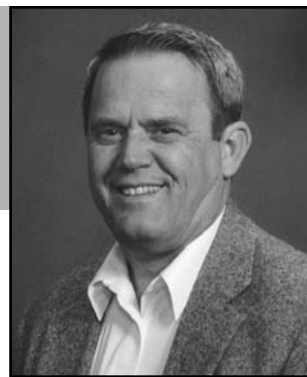
must pay for his blood,” cried Reuben. Relentlessly, Joseph led his brothers down: down into a paroxysm of remorse and despair before revealing himself to them. Then he gave his interpretation of the events that had brought them to that day. “You intended to harm me, God intended it for good.” What an amazing perspective! The brothers were sure that they were caught in the maw of a monstrous retribution. Joseph saw otherwise.

What view do you take of events in your life? If things seem pretty good right now, do you suppose you are being somehow rewarded? If things are quite horrible in your life right now, do you think some chickens could be coming home to roost; that you are paying for past errors?

Sometimes we do reap a reward for good deeds or bad ones. But the law of sowing and reaping is not absolute. Something much greater directs the events of our existence—God. Ultimately, the world is not controlled by the good or evil that we do. Nor is it controlled by evil that others do. God rules. Even events that are unjust, which cause untold heartache, can be drafted into service by God and forced to yield a blessed dividend.

God is greater than all of the world's evil. That is the message of the Cross. Those who plotted the death of Jesus thought that they were ‘taking care of business.’ But God stole the terrible episode from them, and made it his.

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (II Corinthians 5:19).



Pastor Ron Allen

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Good News Unlimited magazine also seeks to keep readers up-to-date on all aspects of GNU's ministries. This includes news on national and international radio broadcasts; public seminars, congresses, and Bible schools within the USA (as well as

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places.” I recall my dad, easing himself into his chair after a hard day’s work, musing aloud: “It’s a great life—if you don’t weaken.” Everyone agrees that the human lot is a frustrating mix of gratifications mitigated by hardships and unreasonable hazards.

But Amos surprises by what he says about the severe and damaging elements. He says that the bad seasons, locust plagues, the rain that missed one farm but generously drenched the one next door, sickness and wars that rob so many of their loved ones; these that might easily be accounted for by sheer bad luck, are not chance happenings at all. They come by way of God.

For God to be associated—not with all the pleasing and happy things that he is usually credited with, but with the negative things as well—is not easy to accept. Amos is not the only Bible writer to do it. So, Isaiah: *“I form the light and create darkness. I bring prosperity and create disaster” (Isaiah 45:7)*. If this is true, then nothing ever happens out of dumb luck. It is freighted with high purpose, it serves an intelligent objective, and it presages a meaningful outcome.

What an amazing idea this is. It proposes the existence of a sovereign Spirit; diligent in his world. It posits a world where nothing ever takes place because the Supreme Watcher was not watching; because he was busy elsewhere; it was impossible for him to produce rain for my dying crops because he was diverted by events in Afghanistan. Not at all! Amos asks us to believe that nothing occurs but by God’s leave. Though evil is everything that God is not; it cannot come except by his permission. Trouble never means God is absent. It means the opposite.

There is more. Precisely because adversity is allowed by God, it has the potential to serve our highest interests. Atheists and believers alike agree that the best aspects of the human condition are non-material. They comprise things which are not really things. They are values, spiritual qualities, and we cannot have them without struggle.

Carl Jung, the famous psychologist remarked:

A life of ease has convinced everyone of the material joys, and has even compelled the spirit to devise new and better ways to material welfare—but it has never produced spirit! Probably only suffering, delusion and self-denial do that.

How I wish that were not so. And you, reader, up to your neck in trouble, near overwhelmed by the sheer bloody-mindedness of outrageous fortune, you fell that you have little use for Carl Jung’s wisdom right now!

Yet, what he says is inescapably so. None of life’s worthwhile treasures—patience, courage, fellow-feeling, faith, hope, love—would be ours to enjoy if we never had to fight our way forward through many dangers and obstacles. They have all come to us in struggle.

Many are offended by Amos, and more will be offended with the repetition of his ideas on these pages. I am thinking of the parent whose child has been killed in an alcohol-fueled auto accident; the young woman, dying of AIDS—not through

her own bad choices—but because of accidental contact with a syringe. Then there is the family evicted from their home because the husband and father has been off work through illness. Some are so sick and tired of battling their way against a pitiless climate, a barrage of heartless and indifferent events, that they do not want to be told that what has happened to them is a blessing.



...the heart cry of humanity.

I do not wish to mock persons by making light of their misfortunes. There is no adequate explanation for the things that happen to some people. When Jesus asked: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* he spoke for us all. That is our question; the heart cry of humanity.

But how shall we do? The world is what it is and we must live in it. We can drag ourselves through our tragedies, curse our luck, and abandon ourselves to bitterness and despair. Or we can choose to make something of ourselves out of what has occurred.

If we choose to believe that God has included the bad parts of life in the fabric of a grand design; if we accept that he is speaking to us, beckoning to us in our troubles, then we will have thrust ourselves into his creative process, betting ourselves on a benevolent and constructive intention in everything that happens.

If we make this choice, we may come through our terrible time stripped of everything we thought we could never do without. But we may find that we have become something more than we were. We may have shed some of our prejudices, become more patient, tolerant, less vindictive, able to empathize with others, and become more loving. We will have gone through the wringer, and come out a better man, or a better woman; able to help ease the world’s vast pain.

Arthur Gossip was a much loved Scottish preacher. His wife sickened and died. To the amazement of his congregation, he occupied the pulpit on the following Sunday. The sermon on that day was entitled: *“When Life Tumbles In, What Then?”*

Continued on next page

We are happy to announce that Ron Allen will be visiting the North American continent, courtesy of the Canadian Good News Unlimited Fellowship. The following is venue information:

Topic: TO JERUSALEM FOR THE FEAST – Lessons from Christ’s Last Journey

October 2-3, 2009

The Banff Full Gospel Church
Corner of Cougar and Squirrel Street.
Banff, Alberta
Contact : Dan Erickson at (604) 309-9990
Horace and Edie Mabley at (604) 857-1641

October 16-17, 2009

Good News Unlimited Fellowship
236 Finch Ave East Toronto, Ontario
Contact: David Okamura (416) 222-9281
Jane Matthews (416) 759-9064

GOOD THINGS CAN COME FROM BAD THINGS

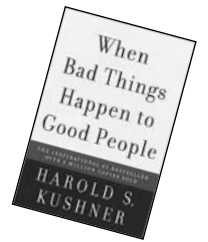
It fascinates me to think of some great souls in history who have been grievously bound. We think for example, of Bunyan lying in Bedford jail, and then we rejoice in the freedom of his mind. His body lay in prison, but his soul was out on the road to the Celestial City with Christian and Hopeful and Faithful and the rest.

You may have read a book called *The Roadmender* by Michael Fairless. For years I thought he must be a wonderful naturalist, with a style of poetic prose that helped one to revel in the glories of nature. I can remember the awe and wonder in my heart when I learnt that “Michael Fairless” was the pen-name of a sick woman who was dying. She lay in bed in a tiny bedroom, and with her left hand wrote the book on a pad propped up against her breast. There is not a moan or a whimper in the book. When you read it you cannot hear anything but the singing of the birds, the whisper of the wind in the trees, the chatter of a brook down the hillside, and the murmur of bees on a summer evening.

-L.D. Weatherhead. KEY NEXT DOOR, p. 196.

BOOK REVIEW

“When Bad Things Happen to Good People” HAROLD S. KUSHNER.



When Harold Kushner’s three-year-old son was diagnosed with a degenerative disease and given only until his early teens to live, he was faced with one of life’s most difficult questions: “Why, God?” Years later, Rabbi Kushner wrote this straightforward and elegant contemplation of the doubts and fears that arise when tragedy strikes. Kushner shares his wisdom as a Rabbi, a parent, a reader, and a human being. Often imitated but never superseded, **When Bad Things Happen to Good People** is a classic that offers clear thinking and consolation in times of sorrow. Since its original publication in 1981 this book has brought solace and hope to millions world wide.

Amazon list price: \$9.95

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Here is part of it:

I do not understand this life of ours, but still less do I comprehend how people in trouble and loss and bereavement can fling away peevishly from the Christian faith. In God’s name, fling to what? Have we not lost enough without losing that too? If Christ is right—if as he says, there are somehow, hidden away from our eyes as yet, still there, wisdom and planning and kindness and love in these dark dispensations—then we can see them through.

But if Christ was wrong, and all that is not so; if God set his foot on my home crudely, heedlessly, blunderingly, blindly, as I unawares might tread on some insect in my path, have I not the right to be angry and sore? If Christ was right, and immortality and the dear hopes of which he speaks do really lie a little way ahead, we can manage to make our way to them.

But if it is not so, if it is all over, if there is nothing more, how dark the darkness grows. You people in the

*sunshine **may** believe the faith, but we in the shadow **must** believe it. We have nothing else.*

There is the unmovable fact that stands over our lives: we have nothing else. We cannot segregate the thorny and grueling parts of our condition from God’s administration of the world. We must not excise drought and pestilence from grace. To do so would force us to endure our woes without consolation and without hope. How dark the darkness would grow.

Amos claims that God is speaking to Israel in all her adversities. “*Yet you did not return to me.*” This makes trouble intensely personal. Bad things that happen are heavy-laden with all the emotion of a lover that has laid siege to the heart of a maid. Nothing comes our way that is not tinged with the tactics of love. If we will have it so, we can live and die triumphantly; knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

This is my father’s world.

O let me ne’er forget,

That though the wrong seems oft so strong,

God is the ruler yet.

