

# PRAYING IN A BROKEN WORLD

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## Preamble

In addressing this topic I do so with the awareness that I “see through a glass darkly” as have many before me. I do not claim to have the final insight on this subject. However I speak as one who has wrestled long and hard with the question of how to pray in a broken world. The past few years in which I have frequently sat with Job on the ash heap, so to say, because of my own failing health, have given me much opportunity to reflect on this subject first hand. I know my sufferings have been minor compared to the that of many. Yet they have been the catalyst for an intense search for a more satisfactory answer than I had been given up to that point. What I will say today is, in effect, a summation of my life-time quest to understand more fully why evil, pain and tragedy riddles the life of humanity – why good and bad people suffer equally in many cases – and how we should pray in the midst of this broken world.

I must say at the outset that I do not consider all things broken completely. I see the image of God reflected in people around me. Many of us do experience genuine love, acceptance, forgiveness and joy in our lives. There is much beauty in creation, none as beautiful in my opinion as a delicate flower in bright sunshine. The innocent laugh of a baby and it’s delight in learning about it’s world remind me that some things are right sometimes in God’s world. But, unfortunately, I have also observed that many things are not right – that some things have gone wrong. That evil exists. That bad things happen – even to good people.

So I invite you into my thought processes as we explore the topic, “Praying in a Broken World.” In the end I will admit that for me much is *still* shrouded in mystery. And it will be quite possible to poke holes in my line of thinking using various biblical passages. To this I respond with the Apostle Peter who himself admitted that some of Paul’s writings are hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16). But for myself, my present understandings on this subject leave *fewer* questions in my mind than I had earlier. They provide greater motivation to join the fight against evil. And they enhance my vision of the God whom I worship. Still, I welcome any instruction or rebuke that might be needed after you hear me out.

## Introduction

If I were to look for a launching pad within the Lord’s Prayer for this sermon, it would come from two phrases *thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*, and *deliver us from evil* (Matt. 6). If you are at all awake, and not in a state of denial, you will have noticed like I have that *there is something wrong with our world*. There is a dark side to our existence. Evil, suffering and destruction swirl around us, and even touch us profoundly at times.

If you have had the fortune of growing up in a loving and caring family, your first impressions as a child were that this world is a wonderful, safe and nurturing place to be. And that is how it should be. But somewhere along the way you found out that your childhood understanding was an illusion – another way of saying that you had to grow up. For some this comes very early in life through the abuse of one kind or another. For others, the protective, illusionary shell stays in

tact a bit longer, depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves – *all is well in God's wonderful world!*

But sooner or later, even in spite of the efforts of those who love us, we all come to understand that *some things in this world have gone badly wrong, at least are not fair.* Some children, through no fault of their own, are born with a deformity or a mental deficiency and we take note. A friend dies in a freak traffic accident while you are allowed to live. Some students get straight A's in all their subjects at school without much effort, while others have to struggle to make the grade. And sometimes they just don't make it. Your favorite aunt dies of cancer, and you wonder why this is necessary at age 35.

Gradually you come to the realization that even your loving parents can not shield you from the effects of a broken world. Sometimes the parents themselves, because of their own broken lives, become the doorway through which we enter the world of brokenness.

So gradually, or suddenly for some, we begin to face the fact that the world around us and often within us is broken. The Apostle Paul says in I Cor. 13:11, ***When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.*** To this we might add, that when I was a child I ***prayed*** like a child. When I became an adult, I ***prayed*** like an adult. When I was a child I prayed with the confidence that the world is a friendly garden in which beauty and order come from God. When I became an adult I began to pray with an awareness that something has gone wrong with this world, that brokenness surrounds me and touches me. And eventually, through one circumstance or another, the cry on my lips becomes, ***Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!*** and ***Deliver us from evil!***

Now the irony is that sometimes the church has taught us *to keep praying like children* – to somehow pretend that all is right with the world, that evil is not really evil, that if we only have enough faith things will turn out right, that suffering can be avoided, and that our wishes can come true – in God's wonderful world. Usually this view has been pressed upon us by those for whom life has held little trouble, ***or*** by those who have not yet learned to take off their masks and speak the truth.

And always there are some biblical references that can be used to support such a dream world. Such as, ***I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13)***, suggesting that if I have appropriate faith in Christ, nothing evil or harmful can touch me! And when it touches *others*, a condescending smugness can sneak into our own hearts. Well, we can say or think to ourselves, at least I have what it takes to live above the world. To bad about the other guy! But *sooner or later* something does touch me. And when it does, the more I have denied that it was possible, the more I am shocked by the evil that knifes me in the gut – the brokenness that envelopes me in the midst of tragedy.

### **The Two prayers of Jacob**

The question we are pursuing is, *how to pray in a broken world.* How will that prayer be different from the prayer that has **not** come to terms with our broken condition. Let's look for the difference in two of Jacob's prayers.

The first one is prayed while on the way to live with his uncle Laban. He has a dream of a ladder going up to heaven with angels going up and down on it, and the Lord himself standing at the top making promises to him. When he awakes he prays like this (Genesis 28:20-22).

**If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear, so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.**

Jacob has what you might call a *child's view* of reality here. He has the assurance that everything is going to turn out alright and because of this he will worship the God who made it all happen, just like it was supposed to happen, in God's wonderful world. You give me what I want and I will worship you! A fair deal!

Many years later, Jacob prays another prayer. Things have not turned out the way he had planned. He had been cheated by his father-in-law in many ways, which he had returned in kind. And now he was sick and tired of the whole mess he was in. It was unbearable. He had to get out of there! The problem was that he was afraid of Laban, so he snuck away. When Laban catches up to him there is quite a scene, but in the end they agree not to hurt each other. When he turned his sights back to his home country he was afraid of Esau, who might very well try to kill him. He had tasted the brokenness, the loss, the evil, the darkness that this world can dish up. He was between a rock and a hard place – between an impossible life with Laban and the wrath of Esau. Notice how he now prays (Genesis 32: 9-12):

**O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O Lord,  
Who said to me, "Go back to your country and your relatives,  
And I will make you prosper," I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness  
you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but  
now I have become two groups. Save me I pray from the hand of my brother Esau,  
for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their  
children. But you have said, "I will surely make you prosper and will make your  
descendants like the sand of the sea, which can not be counted.**

He now knows that life has a way of landing us in a mess, that darkness can hide the soul, that real danger lurks in the shadows. And so his prayer takes this new reality into account. "Things are a mess, Lord. My world has broken apart! Help me! I don't know what to do!" No longer a cherry blossom child's prayer, but an adult prayer of one who has tasted the bitter pill of evil and brokenness. And that night his wrestling match with God left him forever visibly broken. He got a new name in the process, Israel, but it came with a limp that stayed with him the rest of his life.

### **My Changing Prayers**

Have you also found the nature of your prayers changing as life progresses? I have. My earliest prayers were those of a child, because I was a child –

**Little Jesus build a housy -  
In my heart you are to live.**

**Never ever shall you leave me  
In the name of God who never sleeps  
Amen.**

or

**Now I lay me done to sleep  
I pray thee Lord my soul to keep  
If I should die before I wake  
I pray thee Lord my soul to take  
Amen**

Such prayers, followed by a mother's kiss and a gentle "tucking in" of the blankets, was all I needed to know that everything was right in the world. If not, mom and dad would take care of things, and God would help them.

In my case I was not yet an adult when life dealt me some blows creating wounds that still affect me today, even though I have found substantial healing for many of them. I soon found out that my grade one classmates were all a year older than me and that I was the smallest and possibly the least coordinated. I began to feel the pain of being left out, being the last one chosen, or being bullied by big Tommy Kirk in front of my classmates. The arrows penetrated deep into my little heart. Soon I learned by bits and pieces that my parent's relationship was deeply marred, and even stormy. My idyllic and safe little world was coming apart.

So my prayers became couched in fear and even anger. Could I trust my heavenly father if I could not trust my earthly father? I repeated the prayer of repentance a thousand times in fear and trembling - every night I prayed it - hoping it would hold for that night, but not sure that it would. And my increasingly broken heart yielded up nightmares of lostness and darkness and fear, nearly every night. I found myself between Laban and Esau, unsure of myself, and unsure of God. I remember as a young teen standing on a snow bank on a cold clear night, looking at the stars and cursing the God who had allowed me to be born - the God who was ready to throw me into an eternal fire if I didn't jump through the right hoops at the right time. I had tried the jumps many times but they didn't seem to work for me. I wasn't agile enough!

Eventually, one night when I was sixteen years old, through a process I still don't understand, I came to see that God *could* be trusted. As I knelt to submit to that trust I was immersed in waves of love and confidence such as I had not known since early childhood. So I set out on this new journey of faith with a new assurance that *now* all was right in God's world. I had just missed it for a while.

For a while it did in fact seem like all the world were a rose garden. But it did not take too long before I again encountered the unwelcome signs that not all was well in the world. A personal relationship that went sour. The betrayal of a trusted friend. A concerted effort by a fellow missionary to black list me across the country. I saw with my own eyes the injustice and grinding poverty of the masses in Latin America. One day it was all that a few of us could do to keep a father from jumping into the grave where we had laid his little son who had died, probably of

malnutrition. I heard the heart piercing scream of agony and grief – a momentary, defiant shriek against the notion that “all is well in God’s wonderful world.” At least this morning the well-worn Spanish phrase, *Dios lo quiere asi (God wants it this way)* was challenged, and I found myself agreeing with the grief-stricken father.

My innocent childhood prayers of the past were no longer sufficient for what I was seeing and experiencing.

### **A Search for An Answer**

And so throughout my adult life, I have searched for an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people – why sickness, suffering, accidents and death seem to happen apparently at random. In many books, in frequent sermons – usually at funerals, through radio and television preachers, I kept hearing what I came to term a non-answer to my burning question. Basically it went like this:

**God is sovereign. So everything that happens in this world happens by his design. When the tragedy was too horrific, it was conceded that maybe it wasn’t God’s idea, or his action, but since he is sovereign, he at least must have given permission for it to happen. And always Romans 8:28 was the clincher, “*all things work together for good to them that love God.*” Sometimes it was said that God is weaving a beautiful tapestry which we can only see from the bottom side with all its random strands of thread. Once we would get to see the tapestry from God’s point of view it would all make sense. On occasion it was suggested that the tragedy was fair punishment for an ungodly life. Or that God was, in the tragedy, testing you so you could know how strong you really were.**

I must admit that for many years already, I have been uneasy with this response. And I think the greatest unease came with the implication in all of its various forms that **God authors and executes all evil, suffering, accidents, sickness and death – or that at least he allows it to happen for some greater, hidden purpose.**

- Six million Jews and millions more Poles, Czechs and others brutally slaughtered in the holocaust. God’s will? God’s design? God’s permission?
- A child born deformed to hopeful parents. God’s will? God’s design? God’s permission?
- An elderly body curled up in excruciating pain as it waits to be released of life itself. God’s will? God’s design? God’s permission?
- A five year old girl abducted from her home, raped, strangled and thrown into the river. God’s will? God’s design? God’s permission?
- Half the children in Bolivia dying before their fifth birthday from malnutrition and its related diseases. God’s will? God’s design? God’s permission? For some greater good which we can’t know about?

*If so, how then should we pray?* Challenge the sovereignty of God? Tell him he doesn't know what he is doing? Or pray a prayer of humble submission trusting that all will end well some day? If these are the will of God, would it even be right for me to try to stop the evil swirling around me, let alone pray to be delivered from it? Would I not then be thwarting God's plans?

Imagine in your mind God sitting at his huge, heavenly desk. An application comes in to allow the slaughter of 800,000 Tutsis in Rwanda. God hems and haws a little, but in the end says to himself that this might be a good chance to spin off some acts of heroism and courage – and so signs the document - *when it was within his power to reject it!* And now the knocks on the doors in the night begin all over Rwanda – men, women and children butchered like chickens for three months – 800,000 of them – gun, knife, machete, club. ***I gradually came to the conclusion that giving permission for such a genocide, when it was within his power to reject the application, makes God complicit in the evil. In other words it is no different than if God did it himself. At least he was an accomplice, which in any human court would make him as guilty as the actual perpetrator.***

The question then looms in front of me, “How do I then pray?” And how do I then act? Can the rape victim find comfort in the rapist? Can the prisoner in Auschwitz find consolation in the Comandant who has already marched her friend to the gas chambers? Can the wounded man find comfort from the drunk who ran the red light? What do I say to the God who in his sovereign design has brought calamity into my life? Do I bow down and worship in resignation as I watch my husband and sons methodically shot to death in the Russian revolution and then experience the gang rape of a dozen soldiers to boot? It was meant to be this way? The big question for me, ultimately, is, ***Can I worship a God who perpetrates evil or deliberately allows it?***

In my most serious moments of reflection, I think I can not.

### **A Job for Job**

Most Christians struggling with the nature of evil in the world end up in the book of Job. That is small wonder because the book wrestles with the question directly. Once we understand the message of Job, it is said, we will have our answer to why bad things happen to good people.

Could it be, however, that we have assigned too big a job for the book of Job – that the text of Job is **not** the final word regarding suffering and evil? The book of Job is indeed shrouded in mystery and hard to wrap one's mind around. Many similar stories circulated in the Middle East in days of old. Some contain the wager scene like the biblical account in chapters one and two – some don't. Some have the happy ending of the biblical story – some don't. And unlike most other Old Testament books, Job is virtually impossible to place historically and geographically.

And then there is the fact that God makes a wager, a bet, - somewhat out of character for God as far as we know from other sources. And there is the disquieting fact that the answers to why people suffer which Job's friends give, are those common to Old Testament understandings: *God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked* – God had said so in the sacred texts - so Job, you must have sinned! Yet God himself tells these friends to be quiet because they don't know what they are talking about. Much to contemplate and wrestle with in a mysterious Old Testament book.

Usually the answer to the whole riddle, as found in Job, is summed up in God's speech something like this:

**Job, you are limited in your view of what is actually happening. You can not see things from God's point of view, so you have to learn to accept whatever happens as coming from God who has his own reasons for doing what he does. You cannot and will not know why evil happens. So bow down, be silent and worship the God who has all things under control in his world. That is the duty of humankind caught in the cauldron of suffering and evil in the world. Nothing more, nothing less.**

Few commentators on the book of Job will suggest, however, that all evil can be ascribed to an on-going wager between God and Satan. Even if that were the case, it could only explain the evil that happens to believers in God, like Job. It leaves no shred of evidence as to why unbelievers too are caught up in the web of suffering and evil. Have we perhaps tried to make the book of Job answer for too much? Is it the final word? Is there other territory to search – places like creation, perhaps, and the sufferings of Jesus?

There is one clue in God's final speech to Job that serves as a catalyst to look farther afield for some help in our search for the answer to the question as to why good **and** bad people suffer, and how we are to pray in the context of such brokenness. God says in **Job 40:9-14.**

**Do you have an arm like God's  
And can your voice thunder like his?  
Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor,  
And clothe yourself in honor and majesty.  
Unleash the fury of your wrath,  
Look at every proud man and bring him low,  
Look at every proud man and humble him,  
Crush the wicked where they stand.  
Bury them all in the dust together;  
Shroud their faces in the grave.  
Then I myself will admit to you  
That your own right hand can save you.**

Harold Kushner, in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, summarizes the intent of this passage like this: (p 43)

***Job, if you think that it is easy to keep the world straight and true, to keep unfair things from happening to people, you try it.***

In other words God is admitting that he is having a hard time keeping everything happening as he would want it to happen.

How can this be, we say? Isn't God sovereign and all powerful? Why does he find it hard to keep things running smoothly in the world. If God can not fail, then how can he fail to keep evil from rampaging around the planet? This is a very important and serious question, which we will not find answered in Job.

However, if we will rise above this one book, and take a larger view of the world, including creation and the sufferings of Jesus, we may begin moving toward a more satisfying answer.

### **The Creation of a Non-robotic World**

If we go back to the beginning of time – before God's energy was directed toward creation – it seems to me that God must have contemplated what kind of a world he would create. He surely had some options.

One option would be to create a ***robotic*** world. In this world everything would be programmed to do what is right. All creatures great and small, and the universe itself would function in perfect harmony. Any inclination to depart from this utopia would quickly be over ruled by God so that everything would happen ***just like he wanted***. All creation would adore him, love him, obey him and worship him – because there would be no other option.

It is obvious today that God did **not** choose that option. Why not?

The story is told about a young, powerful and wealthy prince who fell in love with a common maiden in one of the villages of the land he ruled. He knew that if he drove up to her humble cottage to take her away to his palace that she would come with him. But he hesitated because he thought that although she would come with him, would she really love him for who he was, not just for the privileges he would provide for her. He was looking for true love, not one bought with privilege. So he disguised himself as a commoner and went to live for a while in the village of the maiden he loved. Gradually they met and she began to like this young man. Soon she declared that she loved him. And then he told her who he really was! Of course she went with him to the palace, but the prince now *knew* that she really loved him for who he was, not for the wealth and privilege he offered her.

Perhaps this story gives us some insight into why God would create a world in which there would be choice. He wanted his creation to voluntarily return the love he had exercised in creating it and nurturing it. There was only one problem, if he allowed his creation a choice, there was a risk involved. Perhaps there would be some who would choose not to return his love. They might even rebel against him. Yet, aware of these risks, God created a world of choice. ***A sovereign God, giving up his right to make everything happen the way he would want it to happen.***

But, some would argue, then God is no longer sovereign. If he allows his creation to choose to love or rebel, to choose evil instead of good, then he is not in control of everything – hence no longer sovereign. But, who can say to a sovereign God that he can not create a world the way he

wants to. If he chooses to give up some of his directive power in the world in order that the love returned to him would be genuine, who can say that he can't do that. He is sovereign!

In any case we know the story well.

**First** he created the heavenly hosts, designed to worship and serve him eternally. But *even here* it was not a coerced devotion, a robotic praise and worship team. He wanted a true devotion and a true service that came from a heart of love. And you guessed it - according to the biblical account many of the heavenly hosts rebelled against him. And to this very day they are seeking to thwart the purposes of God. Evil was on the loose and spiritual warfare had begun.

*Even so*, God's desire for pure devotion remained so strong that he created human kind, like the heavenly hosts, with the ability to choose or reject his love. If he had not done so, we would not really be human. We would only be able to follow instincts like animals do. Even before Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they had a choice either to obey or not. They did not. Maybe like in the heavenly hosts, it was inevitable that some would trespass God's will to love and obey from pure devotion. But don't be too hard on Adam and Eve. If they had not chosen as they did, you and I probably would have.

So now God has two sets of created beings on his hands, some choosing pure devotion, some not. As the human story unfolds, like in the heavens, so on earth, evil is born because of wrong choices. Cain kills Abel, secretly mind you, and then tries to cover it up. A few generations later we encounter Lamech (Genesis 4) It appears that a young man had hit him. So he murdered the lad. That in itself was not so different from Cain's act. What is new is that Lamech celebrates his murder. He puts his story of bloodshed to music and sings it to his wives. I don't know the tune, but I know the lyrics of this first war ballad:

**I have slain a young man for wounding me, tra la,  
A young man for striking me,  
If Cain is avenged sevenfold, tra la,  
Truly Lamech seventy seven fold, ha ha!**

And so the fight is on – on this earth. Hitler's holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and my choices for evil follow like goslings follow mother goose. All is not well in God's world. People have made and continue to make wrong choices. And we all suffer.

**But the plot thickens!** If the foregoing is too much to grasp, what will you do with what follows? Here we really "see through a glass darkly". But somehow, in the wake of evil choices of heavenly and earthly beings, the earth itself is plunged into captivity. As Paul says in **Romans 8:19-23**

**The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We**

**know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.**

### **Understanding our Context**

So then, we live in a fallen world – and it hurts like crazy. *Heavenly hosts* seeking to frustrate God’s will and purpose for the earth and its inhabitants. *Human beings* repeatedly making bad choices that spin their effects from one generation to another. And *the earth* itself held captive and capable of yielding up its own form of destruction and devastation.

So if we ask, “Why do good people suffer?” Or even why does anybody suffer? ***We can say with confidence that it was not God’s idea.*** Nor is **he** the one flogging the earth and its inhabitants. Nor is **he** giving permission in a specific sense to the forces of evil to do their dastardly deeds. Instead, we can be assured that he weeps over the whole mess. How often, he moans, *I would have wanted it to be different*, but the choices made went bad. And the captive earth spills out its diseases, accidents, hurricanes, earthquakes, hail storms, death-defying cold and blistering heat, all taking lives prematurely. Even those who love God dearly and try to follow him sincerely are not exempt from the *random ravages* the world dishes up.

And God weeps! And God so loves the world that he sends his one and only Son into the world, so that whoever believes in him can be saved. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. And for our sakes he was stricken and bruised. For our healing and hope he suffered the floggings of a world floundering out of control. For our comfort he suffered the cruelest fate, even to the point where he cried out from beneath the black shroud of evil, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!” So forever, in the heart of the triune God, there is the knowledge, the intimate experiential knowledge of the pain and suffering that his creation must endure. Unjust, unfair, suffering!

And because of Jesus, those who love him, as we do, do not have to be overwhelmed by the floggings that the heavenly hosts, our fellow human beings and the earth itself dish up for us. Although it felt like it to Jesus, we know that God had not turned his back on his son in the hour of his deepest trial. A few minutes after his primordial cry of forsakenness, Jesus caught the eye of his loving Father and said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” And it was so. And so we know that neither will God forsake us in the midst of our sufferings.

### **So How do We Then Pray**

1. **In the midst of our broken world, we pray with confidence to a God who is not the author of evil.** Rather to a God who is touched deeply by our own infirmities, our tragedies, our sufferings – and those of all of humankind. We do not lose faith in God when we find ourselves swirling downward in a whirlpool of devastation, destruction or pain. Harold Kushner tells of a holocaust survivor who never lost his faith in God. When asked why, he replied that he never for a moment attributed the evil around him to God. God was on his side against the brutality and senseless mayhem of the concentration camps. He knew that and was comforted.

But there are far too many stories of people who lost their faith in God in the midst of unbearable suffering *because* somehow in their minds they made God responsible for their

plight. And they went to their deaths with a snarling curse against God on their lips. How many of our Mennonite people committed suicide in Siberia because they assumed (wrongly, I suggest) that God was responsible for their plight. Read *No Strangers in Exile* by Hans Harder if you want a glimpse of such tragedy.

Praying with the awareness that God is not responsible for the tragedy is a tremendous relief. We don't have to go to the perpetrator for comfort. We can go to a God who is on our side and hurts as much as we do in our suffering.

2. **In the midst of a broken world, we pray with the knowledge that no one is exempt from the randomness of disease, accident, natural disasters and crazy choices people make.** No not even Christians. When we are struck by some tragedy, it is so very human to ask, "*Why me?*" However when we understand the nature of this world, it may be better to ask, "Why not me?" Am *I* so special that nothing should ever touch *me*? That it should always touch someone else? When you walk behind a manure spreader in action it just might be possible that you don't get hit by a whopper. It is less likely that you will not be hit by a smaller missile. And if perchance nothing of substance actually hits you, you will come away from the experience with an unpleasant smell about you. That, in graphic form, is how life works in this world.

We all have a tough time accepting the randomness with which tragedy and misfortune strike. Sometimes we can trace a bad situation to a cause: You drove too fast on ice, hence the accident. You smoked thirty years, hence lung cancer. You ate too much junk food, hence health problems. But we all have experienced situations in which evil or suffering has struck for no apparent reason.

For some it has been easier to make God into a *monster god – making the evil happen* - than to come to terms with the randomness with which evil strikes. Personally, I can no longer do that. Praying with the understanding that we *can be* the target of random evil, humbles us as we take our place in the world of broken and wounded people – and it is here that we find the true community our hearts long for.

3. **In the midst of a broken world I can pray with the comforting awareness that God understands the suffering I endure.** Jesus has been there. He also got hit with a whopper – even bigger than mine. If perchance the Father doesn't quite get it – I am speaking in jest – all he need do is look over at Jesus and ask, "What is it like to suffer in such devastating ways." He understands each lonely heartache. He understands and always cares. Sometimes people will not and cannot understand your situation of brokenness. Sometimes they will even treat you condescendingly, as though you were a leper to be avoided. After all, they have not been hit by a whopper. Maybe there is something wrong with you and it is best to keep one's distance. Or, if they maintain their Puritan theology, they might even feel smug that God is dishing out just desserts – it just goes to show who is really on track with God.

But we know better. We know that God did come and does come down to stand with us in our pain and the pain of the whole world. We lean for comfort, not on the breast of the perpetrator, but on the breast of a loving God who weeps with all those who weep, and feels

every sting of pain as deeply as we do. And as we lean, we hear his gentle whisper in our ears, saying, *“This is not what I wanted either, but I am with you in your suffering.”*

4. **In the midst of a broken world, we can pray with the assurance that - *in all these things God works for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28, NIV)*.** This reading does not make God the author of all those bad things that happen to us. Rather it affirms his creative ability. Basically it states, that whenever you get hit with a whopper, stung by a missile or even absorb the smell of the mess around you that he will go to work and seek to make something of beauty from the mess you are in. God will work with flawed and twisted material he is handed and work wonders with it.

Sometimes, for reasons unknown to us, he will miraculously reverse the effects of the whoppers and missiles – reverse the laws of nature, as it were, and restore someone to an earlier, sunnier situation – a miracle! But if that is our only expectation, we will usually be disappointed. We have to work together with God to allow him to do his work of art with the broken pieces we hand him. If we keep ranting and raving against God because he did this to us, it hinders God’s progress. Rant and rave if you must, but then submit to God’s creative force. There are thousands of priceless works of art God has created out of apparent junk. Some are sitting before me right now.

So my simple prayer to God is that he will take the tattered shreds of my life and my situation and create some beauty out of it. This redemptive activity is part of Christ’s mission among us. And we must be open to it.

5. **In the midst of a broken world, when we know from where the whoppers come, we can enter into the sufferings of others with confidence.** In a world in which God directs specific acts of evil or gives permission for them to happen, we might be reluctant to get involved with those who hurt. History is full of such stories, and they are repeated in the lives of many contemporary Christians. That is why the Puritans looked with disdain on the unsuccessful, the one who didn’t make it, or the one who met misfortune. God was withholding a blessing either to demonstrate the person was not one of the elect, or to teach him a lesson. To help alleviate his suffering would be playing interference with God. We came across many stories like this in Bolivia, within the Mennonite colonies and beyond.

But when we know that God is not the perpetrator or evil, and that we all have been hit by at least some smelly missiles, we can enter more easily into the sufferings of others. And when we do, our prayers for them will be laced with understanding, and hope. We will be able to sit quietly with the hurting in a confident community of suffering. We know we are in this together. We can hold the trembling hand of a traumatized senior. We can embrace the victims of AIDS, be patient with abused children, grieve with those who grieve, cry with those who cry – without fear of being contaminated, because we already are.

At the end of his chapter on “The Prayer of Suffering”, in the book entitled, “Prayer”, Richard Foster suggests a prayer we might pray in this regard..

*O Holy Spirit of God, so many hurt today. Help me to stand with them in their suffering. I do not really know how to do this. My temptation is to offer some quick prayer and send them off rather than endure with them the desolation of suffering. Show me the pathway into their pain. In the name and for the sake of Jesus, Amen.*

**6. In the midst of a broken world, our prayers of words can become prayers of action.**

Knowing that the world is broken, we can get on God's side and do what we can to bind up the broken wounds around us - to fight against injustice, to live responsibly, to give our money, our expertise, and our time to the cause of alleviating the suffering around us. A teenager determines to become a researcher to find a cure for cancer or aids. A grieving mother may join a campaign to keep drunk drivers off the road. A single mom may join the fight to stop abortions from happening. Someone will visit an inmate in Stony Mountain – even become his friend. I will not hesitate to cross the street to comfort a person struggling with depression or other illness.

Every act designed to help alleviate the sufferings of others will in essence also become our prayer, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” And as we go about binding up wounds, giving new hope to victims of abuse, encouraging those around us not to despair, we are actively praying, “Deliver us from evil”. As a matter of fact God is already answering that prayer in our very acts of mercy.

**Conclusion**

So while we live in the midst of a world gone wrong, we can pray with confidence the Lord's prayer. I invite you to stand with me as we pray that prayer in the traditional version.

**Our Father, which art in heaven  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy Kingdom come,  
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread  
And forgive us our trespasses  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the Kingdom, and the power and the glory,  
Forever and ever. Amen!**

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