Introduction and excerpts from Chapter 1 of Rabbi Harold S. Kushner (1981) *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Random House.

Introduction: Why I wrote this Book

This is not an abstract book about God and theology. It does not try to use big words or clever ways of rephrasing questions in an effort to convince us that our problems are not really problems, but that we only think they are. This is a very personal book, written by someone who believes in God and in the goodness of the world, someone who has spent most of his life trying to help other people believe, and was compelled by a personal tragedy to rethink everything he had been taught about God and God's ways.

Our son Aaron had just passed his third birthday when our daughter Ariel was born. Aaron was a bright and happy child, who before the age of two could identify a dozen different varieties of dinosaur and could patiently explain to an adult that dinosaurs were extinct. My wife and I had been concerned about his health from the time he stopped gaining weight at the age of eight months, and from the time his hair started falling out after he turned one year old. Prominent doctors had seen him, had attached complicated names to his condition, and had assured us that he would grow to be very short but would be normal in all other ways. Just before our daughter's birth, we moved from New York to a suburb of Boston, where I became the rabbi of the local congregation. We discovered that the local pediatrician was doing research in problems of children's growth, and we introduced him to Aaron. Two months later—the day our daughter was born—he visited my wife in the hospital, and told us that our son's condition was called progeria, "rapid aging." He went on to say that Aaron would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like a little old man while he was still a child, and would die in his early teens.

How does one handle news like that? I was a young, inexperienced rabbi, not as familiar with the process of grief as I would later come to be, and what I mostly felt that day was a deep, aching sense of unfairness. It didn't make sense. I had been a good person. I had tried to do what was right in the sight of God. More than that, I was living a more religiously committed life than most people I knew, people who had large, healthy families. I believed that I was following God's ways and doing His work. How could this be happening to my family? If God existed, if He was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He do this to me?

And even if I could persuade myself that I deserved this punishment for some sin of neglect or pride that I was not aware of, on what grounds did Aaron have to suffer? He was an innocent child, a happy, outgoing three-year-old. Why should he have to suffer physical and psychological pain every day of his life? Why should he have to be stared at, pointed at, wherever he went? Why should he be condemned to grow into adolescence, see other boys and girls beginning to date, and realize that he would never know marriage or fatherhood? It simply didn't make sense.

Like most people, my wife and I had grown up with an image of God as an all-wise, all-powerful parent figure who would treat us as our earthly parents did, or even better. If we were obedient and deserving, He would reward us. If we got out of line, He would discipline us, reluctantly but firmly. He would protect us from being hurt or from hurting ourselves, and would see to it that we got what we deserved in life.

Like most people, I was aware of the human tragedies that darkened the landscape—the young people who died in car crashes, the cheerful, loving people wasted by crippling diseases, the neighbors and relatives whose retarded or mentally ill children people spoke of in hushed tones. But that awareness never drove me to wonder about God's justice, or to question His fairness. I assumed that He knew more about the world than I did.

Then came that day in the hospital when the doctor told us about Aaron and explained what progeria meant. It contradicted everything I had been taught. I could only repeat over and over again in my mind, "This can't be happening. It is not how the world is supposed to work." Tragedies like this were supposed to happen to selfish, dishonest people whom I, as a rabbi, would then try to comfort by assuring them of God's forgiving love. How could it be happening to me, to my son, if what I believed about the world was true?

I read recently about an Israeli mother who, every year on her son's birthday, would leave the birthday party, go into the privacy of her bedroom, and cry, because her son was now one year closer to military service, one year closer to putting his life in danger, possibly one year closer to making her one of the thousands of Israeli parents who would have to stand at the grave of a child fallen in battle. I read that, and I knew exactly how she felt. Every year, on Aaron's birthday, my wife and I would celebrate. We would rejoice in his growing up and growing in skill. But we would be gripped by the cold foreknowledge that another year's passing brought us closer to the day when he would be taken from us.

I knew then that one day I would write this book. I would write it out of my own need to put into words some of the most important things I have come to believe and know. And I would write it to help other people who might one day find themselves in a similar predicament. I would write it for all those people who wanted to go on believing, but whose anger at God made it hard for them to hold on to their faith and be comforted by religion. And I would write it for all those people whose love for God and devotion to Him led them to blame themselves for their suffering and persuade themselves that they deserved it.

There were not many books, as there were not many people, to help us when Aaron was living and dying. Friends tried, and were helpful, but how much could they really do? And the books I turned to were more concerned with defending God's honor, with logical proof that bad is really good and that evil is necessary to make this a good world, than they were with curing the bewilderment and the anguish of the parent of a dying child. They had answers to all of their own questions, but no answer for mine.

I hope that this book is not like those. I did not set out to write a book that would defend or explain God. There is no need to duplicate the many treatises already on the shelves, and even if there were, I am not a formally trained philosopher. I am fundamentally a religious man who has been hurt by life, and I wanted to write a book that could be given to the person who has been hurt by life—by death, by illness or injury, by rejection or disappointment— and who knows in his heart that if there is justice in the world, he deserved better. What can God mean to such a person? Where can he turn for strength and hope? If you are such a person, if you want to believe in God's goodness and fairness but find it hard because of the things that have happened to you and to people you care about, and if this book helps you do that, then I will have succeeded in distilling some blessing out of Aaron's pain and tears.

If I ever find my book bogging down in technical theological explanations and ignoring the human pain which should be its subject, I hope that the memory of why I set out to write it will pull me back on course. Aaron died two days after his fourteenth birthday.

This is his book, because any attempt to make sense of the world's pain and evil will be judged a success or a failure based on whether it offers an acceptable explanation of why he and we had to undergo what we did. And it is his book in another sense as well—because his life made it possible, and because his death made it necessary.

Chapter 1: Why Do the Righteous Suffer?

There is only one question which really matters: why do bad things happen to good people? All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting; somewhat like doing the crossword puzzle in the Sunday paper and feeling very satisfied when you have made the words fit; but ultimately without the capacity to reach people where they really care. Virtually every meaningful conversation I have ever had with people on the subject of God and religion has either started with this question, or gotten around to it before long. Not only the troubled man or woman who has just come from a discouraging diagnosis at the doctor's office, but the college student who tells me that he has decided there is no God, or the total stranger who comes up to me at a party just when I am ready to ask the hostess for my coat, and says, "I hear you're a rabbi; how can you believe that . . ." —they all have one thing in common. They are all troubled by the unfair distribution of suffering in the world.

The misfortunes of good people are not only a problem to the people who suffer and to their families. They are a problem to everyone who wants to believe in a just and fair and livable world. They inevitably raise questions about the goodness, the kindness, even the existence of God.

I am the rabbi of a congregation of six hundred families, or about twenty-five hundred people. I visit them in the hospital, I officiate at their funerals, I try to help them through the wrenching pain of their divorces, their business failures, their unhappiness with their children. I sit and listen to them pour out their stories of terminally ill husbands or wives, of senile parents for whom a long life is a curse rather than a blessing, of seeing people whom they love contorted with pain or buried by frustration. And I find it very hard to tell them that life is fair, that God gives people what they deserve and need. Time after time, I have seen families and even whole communities unite in prayer for the recovery of a sick person, only to have their hopes and prayers mocked. I have seen the wrong people get sick, the wrong people be hurt, the wrong people die young.

Like every reader of this book, I pick up the daily paper and fresh challenges to the idea of the world's goodness assault my eyes: senseless murders, fatal practical jokes, young people killed in automobile accidents on the way to their wedding or coming home from their high school prom. I add these stories to the personal tragedies I have known, and I have to ask myself: Can I, in good faith, continue to teach people that the world is good, and that a kind and loving God is responsible for what happens in it?

People don't have to be unusual, saintly human beings to make us confront this problem. We may not often find ourselves wondering, "why do totally unselfish people suffer, people who never do anything wrong?" because we come to know very few such individuals. But we often find ourselves asking why ordinary people, nice friendly neighbors, neither extraordinarily good nor extraordinarily bad, should suddenly have to face the agony of pain and tragedy. If the world were fair, they would not seem to deserve it. They are neither very much better nor very much worse than most people we know; why should their lives be so much harder? To ask "Why do the righteous suffer?" or "Why do bad things happen to good people?" is not to limit our concern to the martyrdom of saints and sages, but to try to understand why ordinary people—ourselves and people around us—should have to bear extraordinary burdens of grief and pain.

I was a young rabbi just starting out in my profession, when I was called on to try to help a family through an unexpected and almost unbearable tragedy. This middle-aged couple had one daughter, a bright nineteen-year-old girl who was in her freshman year at an out-of-state college. One morning at breakfast, they received a phone call from the university infirmary. "We have some bad news for you. Your daughter collapsed while walking to class this morning. It seems a blood vessel burst in her brain. She died before we could do anything for her. We're terribly sorry."

Stunned, the parents asked a neighbor to come in to help them decide what steps to take next. The neighbor notified the synagogue, and I went over to see them that same day. I entered their home, feeling very inadequate, not knowing any words that could ease their pain. I anticipated anger, shock, grief, but I didn't expect to hear the first words they said to me: "You know, Rabbi, we didn't fast last Yom Kippur."

Why did they say that? Why did they assume that they were somehow responsible for this tragedy? Who taught them to believe in a God who would strike down an attractive, gifted young woman without warning as punishment for someone else's ritual infraction?

One of the ways in which people have tried to make sense of the world's suffering in every generation has been by assuming that we deserve what we get, that somehow our misfortunes come as punishment for our sins:

Tell the righteous it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked, it shall be ill with him, for what his hands have done shall be done to him. (Isaiah 3:10–11)

But Er, Judah's first-born, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord slew him. (Genesis 38:7)

No ills befall the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble. (Proverbs 12:21)

Consider, what innocent ever perished, or where have the righteous been destroyed? (Job 14:7)

…It is tempting at one level to believe that bad things happen to people (especially other people) because God is a righteous judge who gives them exactly what they deserve. By believing that, we keep the world orderly and understandable. We give people the best possible reason for being good and for avoiding sin. And by believing that, we can maintain an image of God as all-loving, all-powerful, and totally in control. Given the reality of human nature, given the fact that none of us is perfect and that each of us can, without too much difficulty, think of things he has done which he should not have done, we can always find grounds for justifying what happens to us. But how comforting, how religiously adequate, is such an answer?

The couple whom I tried to comfort, the parents who had lost their only child at age nineteen with no warning, were not profoundly religious people. They were not active in the synagogue; they had not even fasted on Yom Kippur, a tradition which even many otherwise nonobservant Jews maintain. But when they were stunned by tragedy, they reverted back to the basic belief that God punishes people for their sins. They sat there feeling that their daughter's death had been their fault; had they been less selfish and less lazy about the Yom Kippur fast some six months earlier, she might still be alive. They sat there angry at God for having exacted His pound of flesh so strictly, but afraid to admit their anger for fear that He would punish them again. Life had hurt them, and religion could not comfort them. Religion was making them feel worse.

The idea that God gives people what they deserve, that our misdeeds cause our misfortune, is a neat and attractive solution to the problem of evil at several levels, but it has a number of serious limitations. As we have seen, it teaches people to blame themselves. It creates guilt even where there is no basis for guilt. It makes people hate God, even as it makes them hate themselves. And most disturbing of all, it does not even fit the facts.

Perhaps if we had lived before the era of mass communications, we could have believed this thesis, as many intelligent people of those centuries did. It was easier to believe then. You needed to ignore fewer cases of bad things happening to good people. Without newspapers and television, without history books, you could shrug off the occasional death of a child or of a saintly neighbor. We know too much about the world to do that today. How can anyone who recognizes the names Auschwitz and My Lai, or has walked the corridors of hospitals and nursing homes, dare to answer the question of the world's suffering by quoting Isaiah: "Tell the righteous it shall be well with them"? To believe that today, a person would either have to deny the facts that press upon him from every side, or else define what he means by "righteous" in order to fit the inescapable facts. We would have to say that a righteous person was anyone who lived long and well, whether or not he was honest and charitable, and a wicked person was anyone who suffered, even if that person's life was otherwise commendable.

A true story: an eleven-year-old boy of my acquaintance was given a routine eye examination at school and found to be just nearsighted enough to require glasses. No one was terribly surprised at the news. His parents both wear glasses, as does his older sister. But for some reason, the boy was deeply upset at the prospect, and would not tell anyone why. Finally, one night as his mother was putting him to bed, the story came out. A week before the eye examination, the boy and two older friends were looking through a pile of trash that a neighbor had set out for collection, and found a copy of the magazine Playboy. With a sense that they were doing something naughty, they spent several minutes looking at the pictures of unclothed women. When, a few days later, the boy failed the eye test at school and was found to need glasses, he jumped to the conclusion that God had begun the process of punishing him with blindness for looking at those pictures.

Sometimes we try to make sense of life's trials by saying that people do in fact get what they deserve, but only over the course of time. At any given moment, life may seem unfair and innocent people may appear to be suffering. But if we wait long enough, we believe, we will see the righteousness of God's plan emerge…

I would acknowledge that [this is] something perceptive and important about the world we live in, that being dishonest and unscrupulous often gives people a head start, but that justice catches up to them…But having said that, I would be obliged to point out that there is a lot of wishful thinking in [t]his theology…How does [one] explain the fact that God, who is presumably behind this arrangement, does not always give the righteous man time to catch up? Some good people die unfulfilled; others find length of days to be more of a punishment than a privilege…

I think of an acquaintance of mine who built up a modestly successful business through many years of hard work, only to be driven into bankruptcy when he was cheated by a man he had trusted. I can tell him that the victory of evil over good is only temporary, that the other person's evil ways will catch up to him. But in the meantime, my acquaintance is a tired, frustrated man, no longer young, and grown cynical about the world. Who will send his children to college, who will pay the medical bills that go with advancing age, during the years it takes for God's justice to catch up with him? No matter how much I would like to believe…that justice will ultimately emerge, can I guarantee that he will live long enough to see himself vindicated? I find I cannot share the optimism…that the righteous, in the long run, will flourish....

Often, victims of misfortune try to console themselves with the idea that God has His reasons for making this happen to them, reasons that they are in no position to judge. I think of a woman I know named Helen.

The trouble started when Helen noticed herself getting tired after walking several blocks or standing in line. She chalked it up to getting older and having put on some weight. But one night, coming home after dinner with friends, Helen stumbled over the threshold of the front door, sent a lamp crashing to the floor, and fell to the floor herself. Her husband tried to joke about her getting drunk on two sips of wine, but Helen suspected that it was no joking matter. The following morning, she made an appointment to see a doctor.

The diagnosis was multiple sclerosis. The doctor explained that it was a degenerative nerve disease, and that it would gradually get worse, maybe quickly, maybe gradually over many years. At some point Helen would find it harder to walk without support. Eventually she would be confined to a wheelchair, lose bowel and bladder control, and become more and more of an invalid until she died.

The worst of Helen's fears had come true. She broke down and cried when she heard that. "Why should this happen to me? I've tried to be a good person. I have a husband and young children who need me. I don't deserve this. Why should God make me suffer like this?" Her husband took her hand and tried to console her: "You can't talk like that. God must have His reasons for doing this, and it's not for us to question Him. You have to believe that if He wants you to get better, you will get better, and if He doesn't, there has to be some purpose to it."

Helen tried to find peace and strength in those words. She wanted to be comforted by the knowledge that there was some purpose to her suffering, beyond her capacity to understand. She wanted to believe that it made sense at some level. All her life, she had been taught—at religious school and in science classes alike—that the world made sense, that everything that happened, happened for a reason. She wanted so desperately to go on believing that, to hold on to her belief that God was in charge of things, because if He wasn't, who was? It was hard to live with multiple sclerosis, but it was even harder to live with the idea that things happened to people for no reason, that God had lost touch with the world and nobody was in the driver's seat.

Helen didn't want to question God or be angry at Him. But her husband's words only made her feel more abandoned and more bewildered. What kind of higher purpose could possibly justify what she would have to face? How could this in any way be good? Much as she tried not to be angry at God, she felt angry, hurt, betrayed. She had been a good person; not perfect, perhaps, but honest, hard-working, helpful, as good as most people and better than many who were walking around healthy. What reasons could God possibly have for doing this to her? And on top of it all, she felt guilty for being angry at God. She felt alone in her fear and suffering. If God had sent her this affliction, if He, for some reason, wanted her to suffer, how could she ask Him to cure her of it?

In 1924 the novelist Thornton Wilder attempted to confront this question of questions in his novel The Bridge of San Luis Rey. One day in a small town in Peru, a rope bridge over a chasm breaks and the five people who are crossing the bridge fall to their deaths. A young Catholic priest happens to be watching, and is troubled by the event. Was it sheer accident, or was it somehow God's will that those five people should die that way? He investigates their life stories, and comes to an enigmatic conclusion: all five had recently resolved a problematic situation in their lives and were now about to enter a new phase. Perhaps it was an appropriate time for each of them to die, thinks the priest.

I confess that I find that answer ultimately unsatisfying. For Wilder's five pedestrians on a rope bridge, let us substitute two hundred and fifty passengers on an airplane that crashes. It strains the imagination to claim that every single one of them had just passed a point of resolution in his life. The human-interest stories in the newspapers after a plane crash seem to indicate the opposite—that many of the victims were in the middle of important work, that many left young families and unfulfilled plans. In a novel, where the author's imagination can control the facts, sudden tragedies can happen to people when the plot calls for it. But experience has taught me that real life is not all that neat.

It may be that Thornton Wilder came to that conclusion himself. More than forty years after writing The Bridge of San Luis Rey, an older and wiser Wilder returned to the question of why good people suffer in another novel, The Eighth Day. The book tells the story of a good and decent man whose life is ruined by bad luck and hostility. He and his family suffer although they are innocent. At the end of the novel, where the reader would hope for a happy ending, with heroes rewarded and villains punished, there is none. Instead, Wilder offers us the image of a beautiful tapestry. Looked at from the right side, it is an intricately woven work of art, drawing together threads of different lengths and colors to make up an inspiring picture. But turn the tapestry over, and you will see a hodgepodge of many threads, some short and some long, some smooth and some cut and knotted, going off in different directions. Wilder offers this as his explanation of why good people have to suffer in this life. God has a pattern into which all of our lives fit. His pattern requires that some lives be twisted, knotted, or cut short, while others extend to impressive lengths, not because one thread is more deserving than another, but simply because the pattern requires it. Looked at from underneath, from our vantage point in life, God's pattern of reward and punishment seems arbitrary and without design, like the underside of a tapestry. But looked at from outside this life, from God's vantage point, every twist and knot is seen to have its place in a great design that adds up to a work of art.

There is much that is moving in this suggestion, and I can imagine that many people would find it comforting. Pointless suffering, suffering as punishment for some unspecified sin, is hard to bear. But suffering as a contribution to a great work of art designed by God Himself may be seen, not only as a tolerable burden, but even as a privilege. So one victim of medieval misfortune is supposed to have prayed, "Tell me not why I must suffer. Assure me only that I suffer for Thy sake."

On closer examination, however, this approach is found wanting. For all its compassion, it too is based in large measure on wishful thinking. The crippling illness of a child, the death of a young husband and father, the ruin of an innocent person through malicious gossip—these are all real. We have seen them. But nobody has seen Wilder's tapestry. All he can say to us is "Imagine that there might be such a tapestry." I find it very hard to accept hypothetical solutions to real problems…

Furthermore, my religious commitment to the supreme value of an individual life makes it hard for me to accept an answer that is not scandalized by an innocent person's pain, that condones human pain because it supposedly contributes to an overall work of esthetic value. If a human artist or employer made children suffer so that something immensely impressive or valuable could come to pass, we would put him in prison. Why then should we excuse God for causing such undeserved pain, no matter how wonderful the ultimate result may be?

Helen, contemplating a life of physical pain and mental anguish, finds that her illness has robbed her of her childhood faith in God and in the goodness of the world. She challenges her family, her friends, her clergyman, to explain why such a terrible thing should happen to her, or for that matter to anyone. If there really is a God, says Helen, she hates Him, and hates whatever "grand design" caused Him to inflict such misery on her.

Let us now consider another question: Can suffering be educational? Can it cure us of our faults and make us better people? Sometimes religious people who would like to believe that God has good reasons for making us suffer, try to imagine what those reasons might be. In the words of one of the great Orthodox Jewish teachers of our time, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Suffering comes to ennoble man, to purge his thoughts of pride and superficiality, to expand his horizons. In sum, the purpose of suffering is to repair that which is faulty in a man's personality."

Just as a parent sometimes has to punish a child whom he loves, for the child's sake, so God has to punish us. A parent who pulls his child out of a busy roadway, or refuses to give him a candy bar before supper, is not being mean or punitive or unfair. He or she is just being a concerned, responsible parent. Sometimes a parent even has to punish a child, with a spanking or a deprivation, in order to drive home a lesson. The child may feel that he is being arbitrarily deprived of something all the other children have, and he may wonder why an ostensibly loving parent should treat him that way, but that is because he is still a child. When he grows up, he will come to understand the wisdom and necessity of it.

Similarly, we are told, God treats us the way a wise and caring parent treats a naive child, keeping us from hurting ourselves, withholding something we may think we want, punishing us occasionally to make sure we understand that we have done something seriously wrong, and patiently enduring our temper tantrums at His "unfairness" in the confidence that we will one day mature and understand that it was all for our own good. "For whom the Lord loves, He chastises, even as a father does to the son he loves." (Proverbs 3:12)

The newspapers recently carried the story of a woman who had spent six years traveling around the world buying antiques, preparing to set up a business. A week before she was ready to open, a wayward bolt of lightning set off an electrical fire in a block of stores, and several shops, including hers, were burned down. The goods, being priceless and irreplaceable, were insured for only a fraction of their value. And what insurance settlement could compensate a middle-aged woman for six years of her life spent in searching and collecting? The poor woman was distraught. "Why did this have to happen? Why did it happen to me?" One friend, trying to console her, was quoted as saying, "Maybe God is trying to teach you a lesson. Maybe He is trying to tell you that He doesn't want you to be rich. He doesn't want you to be a successful businesswoman, caught up in profit-and-loss statements all day long and annual trips to the Far East to buy things. He wants you to put your energies into something else, and this was His way of getting His message across to you."

A contemporary teacher has used this image: if a man who knew nothing about medicine were to walk into the operating room of a hospital and see doctors and nurses performing an operation, he might assume that they were a band of criminals torturing their unfortunate victim. He would see them tying the patient down, forcing a cone over his nose and mouth so that he could not breathe, and sticking knives and needles into him. Only someone who understood surgery would realize that they were doing all this to help the patient, not to torment him. So too, it is suggested, God does painful things to us as His way of helping us.

Consider the case of Ron, a young pharmacist who ran a drugstore with an older partner. When Ron bought into the business, his older colleague told him that the store had recently been the target of a series of holdups by young drug addicts looking for drugs and cash. One day, when Ron was almost ready to close up, a teenage junkie pulled a small-caliber handgun on him and asked for drugs and money. Ron was willing to lose a day's receipts rather than try to be a hero.

He went to open the cash register, his hands trembling as he did so. As he turned, he stumbled and reached for the counter to brace himself. The robber thought he was going for a gun, and fired. The bullet went through Ron's abdomen and lodged in his spinal cord. Doctors removed it, but the damage had been done. Ron would never walk again.

Friends tried to console him. Some held his hand and commiserated with him. Some told him of experimental drugs doctors were using on paraplegics, or of miraculous spontaneous recoveries they had read about. Others tried to help him understand what had happened to him, and to answer his question, "Why me?"

"I have to believe," one friend said, "that everything that happens in life, happens for a purpose. Somehow or other, everything that happens to us is meant for our good. Look at it this way. You were always a pretty cocky guy, popular with girls, flashy cars, confident you were going to make a lot of money. You never really took time to worry about the people who couldn't keep up with you. Maybe this is God's way of teaching you a lesson, making you more thoughtful, more sensitive to others. Maybe this is God's way of purging you of pride and arrogance, and thinking about how you were going to be such a success. It's His way of making you a better, more sensitive person."

The friend wanted to be comforting, to make sense of this senseless accident. But if you were Ron, what would your reaction have been? Ron remembers thinking that if he hadn't been confined to a hospital bed, he would have punched the other man. What right did a normal, healthy person—a person who would soon be driving home, walking upstairs, looking forward to playing tennis—have to tell him that what had happened to him was good and was in his best interests?

The problem with a line of reasoning like this one is that it isn't really meant to help the sufferer or to explain his suffering. It is meant primarily to defend God, to use words and ideas to transform bad into good and pain into privilege. Such answers are thought up by people who believe very strongly that God is a loving parent who controls what happens to us, and on the basis of that belief adjust and interpret the facts to fit their assumption. It may be true that surgeons stick knives into people to help them, but not everyone who sticks a knife into somebody else is a surgeon. It may be true that sometimes we have to do painful things to people we love for their benefit, but not every painful thing that happens to us is beneficial.

I would find it easier to believe that I experience tragedy and suffering in order to "repair" that which is faulty in my personality if there were some clear connection between the fault and the punishment. A parent who disciplines a child for doing something wrong, but never tells him what he is being punished for, is hardly a model of responsible parenthood. Yet, those who explain suffering as God's way of teaching us to change are at a loss to specify just what it is about us we are supposed to change.

Equally unhelpful would be the explanation that Ron's accident happened not to make him a more sensitive person, but to make his friends and family more sensitive to the handicapped than they would otherwise have been. Perhaps women give birth to dwarfed or retarded children as part of God's plan to deepen and enlarge their souls, to teach them compassion and a different kind of love.

We have all read stories of little children who were left unwatched for just a moment and fell from a window or into a swimming pool and died. Why does God permit such a thing to happen to an innocent child? It can't be to teach a child a lesson about exploring new areas. By the time the lesson is over, the child is dead. Is it to teach the parents and baby-sitters to be more careful? That is too trivial a lesson to be purchased at the price of a child's life. Is it to make the parents more sensitive, more compassionate people, more appreciative of life and health because of their experience? Is it to move them to work for better safety standards, and in that way save a hundred future lives? The price is still too high, and the reasoning shows too little regard for the value of an individual life. I am offended by those who suggest that God creates retarded children so that those around them will learn compassion and gratitude. Why should God distort someone else's life to such a degree in order to enhance my spiritual sensitivity? If we cannot satisfactorily explain suffering by saying we deserve what we get, or by viewing it as a "cure" for our faults, can we accept the interpretation of tragedy as a test? Many parents of dying children are urged to read the twenty-second chapter of the Book of Genesis to help them understand and accept their burden. In that chapter, God orders Abraham to take his son Isaac, whom he loves, and offer him to God as a human sacrifice. The chapter begins with the words "It came to pass after all these matters that the Lord tested Abraham." God had Abraham go through that ordeal to test his loyalty and the strength of his faith. When he passed the test, God promised to reward him liberally for the strength he had shown.

For those who have difficulty with the notion of a God who plays such sadistic games with His most faithful follower, proponents of this view explain that God knows how the story will end. He knows that we will pass the test, as Abraham did, with our faith intact (though, in Abraham's case, the child did not die). He puts us to the test so that we will discover how strong and faithful we are.

The Talmud, the compilation of the teachings of the rabbis between the years 200 B.C. and A.D. 500, explains Abraham's test this way: If you go to the marketplace, you will see the potter hitting his clay pots with a stick to show how strong and solid they are. But the wise potter hits only the strongest pots, never the flawed ones. So too, God sends such tests and afflictions only to people He knows are capable of handling them, so that they and others can learn the extent of their spiritual strength.

I was the parent of a handicapped child for fourteen years, until his death. I was not comforted by this notion that God had singled me out because He recognized some special spiritual strength within me and knew that I would be able to handle it better. It didn't make me feel "privileged," nor did it help me understand why God has to send handicapped children into the lives of a hundred thousand unsuspecting families every year.

Writer Harriet Sarnoff Schiff has distilled her pain and tragedy into an excellent book, *The Bereaved Parent*. She remembers that when her young son died during an operation to correct a congenital heart malfunction, her clergyman took her aside and said, "I know that this is a painful time for you. But I know that you will get through it all right, because God never sends us more of a burden than we can bear. God only let this happen to you because He knows that you are strong enough to handle it." Harriet Schiff remembers her reaction to those words: "If only I was a weaker person, Robbie would still be alive."

Does God "temper the wind to the shorn lamb"? Does He never ask more of us than we can endure? My experience, alas, has been otherwise. I have seen people crack under the strain of unbearable tragedy. I have seen marriages break up after the death of a child, because parents blamed each other for not taking proper care or for carrying the defective gene, or simply because the memories they shared were unendurably painful. I have seen some people made noble and sensitive through suffering, but I have seen many more people grow cynical and bitter. I have seen people become jealous of those around them, unable to take part in the routines of normal living. I have seen cancers and automobile accidents take the life of one member of a family, and functionally end the lives of five others, who could never again be the normal, cheerful people they were before disaster struck. If God is testing us, He must know by now that many of us fail the test. If He is only giving us burdens we can bear, I have seen Him miscalculate far too often.

When all else fails, some people try to explain suffering by believing that it comes to liberate us from a world of pain and lead us to a better place. I received a phone call one day informing me that a five-year-old boy in our neighborhood had run out into the street after a ball, had been hit by a car and killed. I didn't know the boy; his family was not part of the congregation. But several children from the congregation had known him and played with him. Their mothers attended the funeral, and some of them told me about it afterwards.

In the eulogy, the family's clergyman had said, "This is not a time for sadness or tears. This is a time for rejoicing, because Michael has been taken out of this world of sin and pain with his innocent soul unstained by sin. He is in a happier land now where there is no pain and no grief; let us thank God for that."

I heard that, and I felt so bad for Michael's parents. Not only had they lost a child without warning, they were being told by the representative of their religion that they should rejoice in the fact that he had died so young and so innocent, and I couldn't believe that they felt much like rejoicing at that moment. They felt hurt, they felt angry, they felt that God had been unfair to them, and here was God's spokesman telling them to be grateful to God for what had happened.

Sometimes in our reluctance to admit that there is unfairness in the world, we try to persuade ourselves that what has happened is not really bad. We only think that it is. It is only our selfishness that makes us cry because five-year-old Michael is with God instead of living with us. Sometimes, in our cleverness, we try to persuade ourselves that what we call evil is not real, does not really exist, but is only a condition of not enough goodness, even as "cold" means "not enough heat," or darkness is a name we give to the absence of light. We may thus "prove" that there is really no such thing as darkness or cold, but people do stumble and hurt themselves because of the dark, and people do die of exposure to cold. Their deaths and injuries are no less real because of our verbal cleverness.

Sometimes, because our souls yearn for justice, because we so desperately want to believe that God will be fair to us, we fasten our hopes on the idea that life in this world is not the only reality. Somewhere beyond this life is another world where “the last shall be first” and those whose lives were cut short here on earth will be reunited with those they loved, and will spend eternity with them.

Neither I nor any other living person can know anything about the reality of that hope. We know that our physical bodies decay after we die. I for one believe that the part of us which is not physical, the part we call the soul or personality, does not and cannot die. But I am not capable of imagining what a soul without a body looks like. Will we be able to recognize disembodied souls as being the people we had known and loved? Will a man who lost his father at a young age, and then lived a full life, be older, younger, or the same age as his father in the world-to-come? Will the souls of the retarded or the short-tempered be somehow made whole in Heaven?

People who have been close to death and recovered tell of seeing a bright light and being greeted by someone they had loved, now deceased. After our son’s death, our daughter dreamed that she had died and was welcomed into Heaven by her brother, now grown normal, and by her grandmother (who had died the year before). Needless to say, we have no way of knowing whether these visions are intimations of reality or products of our own wishful thinking.

Belief in a world to come where the innocent are compensated for their suffering can help people endure the unfairness of life in this world without losing faith. But it can also be an excuse for not being troubled or outraged by injustice around us, and not using our God-given intelligence to try to do something about it. The dictate of practical wisdom for people in our situation might be to remain mindful of the possibility that our lives continue in some form after death, perhaps in a form our earthly imaginations cannot conceive of. But at the same time, since we cannot know for sure, we would be well advised to take this world as seriously as we can, in case it turns out to be the only one we will ever have, and to look for meaning and justice here.

All the responses to tragedy which we have considered have at least one thing in common. They all assume that God is the cause of our suffering, and they try to understand why God would want us to suffer. Is it for our own good, or is it a punishment we deserve, or could it be that God does not care what happens to us? Many of the answers were sensitive and imaginative, but none was totally satisfying. Some led us to blame ourselves in order to spare God’s reputation. Others asked us to deny reality or to repress our true feelings. We were left either hating ourselves for deserving such a fate, or hating God for sending it to us when we did not deserve it.

There may be another approach. Maybe God does not cause our suffering. Maybe it happens for some reason other than the will of God. The psalmist writes, “I lift mine eyes to the hills; from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, maker of Heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1–2) He does not say, “My pain comes from the Lord,” or “my tragedy comes from the Lord.” He says “my help comes from the Lord.”

Could it be that God does not cause the bad things that happen to us? Could it be that He doesn’t decide which families shall give birth to a handicapped child, that He did not single out Ron to be crippled by a bullet or Helen by a degenerative disease, but rather that He stands ready to help them and us cope with our tragedies if we could only get beyond the feelings of guilt and anger that separate us from Him? Could it be that “How could God do this to me?” is really the wrong question for us to ask?