Stubborn Grace

Isaiah 48

Sermon

Why do bad things happen to good peo? A q that arises quite publicly in wake of a great tragedy: e.g., flooding in Chennai, India's 4th largest city, earlier this month, claimed lives of nearly 300 peo. But a q that arises w/in virtually every human heart when bad circs befall us. Perh we don't voice it bc, compared to Chennai, our "bad things" not nearly as tragic as others. Nevertheless when we exp misfortune/adversity/ suffering, this q arises w/in: why is this bad thing happening to me?

Over past few wks been studying a sec of Isa chock full of grand theo truths. Chs 40–48 one of lengthiest secs in whole B devoted to emphasizing uniqueness & glory of 1TG. Many well-known vss. In fact no doubt when some of them have been read here, a tune from Handel's *Messiah* comes imm to mind. (And more coming!) But what is often lost in this sec is that G was not giving all these deep theo truths in a historical vacuum. Sometimes we think that G dropped B out of heaven all at once. Not the way it happened: B written over 100s of yrs: at least a 1000 yr period, more likely 1500 yrs & poss even more. What's more B written by real humans, granted under insp of HS, by not merely assts copying dictation—writings reflect their differing personalities, pers exp, even varying vocab. Furthermore B written to spec peo facing spec historical sit. B not truth in a vacuum, but truth in history & to und truth communicated in a spec historical moment, must und that moment.

When it comes to chs 40–48, "that moment" is 700 yrs before J's birth. Isa a proph in Judah, in cap city Jeru. Throughout 1st half of book Isa warned two kings—1st Ahaz then Hezk—to entrust themselves to Isr's G, but both ult failed. Ergo ch 39 ends w prediction: Bab will come & take Jeru captive. Prediction leads to these chs: Isa looking ahead to Bab Cap, preparing his gen for it, looking ahead & speaking to gen that

would exp it. & has good news for them: Bab Cap not end of story. G would not give up on his peo. Ergo 40.1: *comfort, comfort my peo*. Ergo chs 40–48: G unlike gods of nats, 1TG who rules over all, would restore his peo & would do it in most unusual way: G promised to raise up a king who would overthrow Bab & return G's peo to Promised Land. & to prove he's unlike gods of nats/1TG who rules over all, G names him: *Cyrus* (45.1). Recurs in today's psg: v. 14: *the L's chosen ally will carry out his purpose vs Bab; his arm will be vs the Babs.* 150+ yrs before it happens, well before even Cyrus' parents born, G names him. Proof pos that Isr's G is 1TG: not only would he deliver his peo some day, he predicts name of one who would do it.

But all of these promises raises a q: why did peo have to exp cap in 1st place? If G was going to deliver them in end, why not just start there? Why have them go through misfortune/adversity/suffering of Bab Cap? Or, to put it another away, why do bad things happen to good peo? An imp q, not just in looking back at Jeru 700 yrs before X, but for us in our historical moment today. Obviously no way I can address every angle of this q in one msg, no matter how long that msg might be. But this psg instructive for us: G revealed certain truths in that historical moment to inform us in our historical moment.

From outset let me suggest two ways we must not ans q. Deny existence of evil (Hindu, Buddhist, Xian Sci): an illusion. Not only existentially unsatisfying ans, Scr does speak of certain events as "bad," calamity, adversity, pain, suffering. These things real & does not suffice to ans q by saying, "Bad things don't happen." Deny existence of G. More likely option in west & no doubt approach some of you take. More sympathy for this view than other, but I would suggest that denying G's existence doesn't actually solve prob. If no G, then by what standard can anything be called good or evil? Evil may exist, but what makes it evil? My exp? Pop opinion? Univ values? None ult. Encourage you to rethink. Only rational way to id diff bet good & evil is to affirm existence of G.

I realize prob of evil quite a prob for Xian theo, so let me take up q from perspective of this psg. Ch 48 ans a more spec q than merely, Why do bad things happen to good peo? Narrows in on q: **Why do bad things happen to G's peo?** v. 1—*you descendants of Jacob, you who are called by name of Isr, come from line of Judah*. A more spec prob than what we've been considering. One thing for peo in general to exp bad things, but if there is a G, one might expect that he would shield his own peo from any of those bad things. No doubt argument Isa's aud would have raised: "look at G's promises to us/fam tree/our ancestor Judah to whom was promised rulership." Not only fam tree, but relig devoted: vv 1–2—*take oaths in name of the L, invoke G of Isr, call yourselves citizens of holy city, claim to rely on God of Isr*. "Look at who we are & look at what we do; how can we fall to pagan Bab? If G is 1TG, how can he do this to us?"

Isa's ans: G brings about adversity to wake us up. Like a bucket of cold water splashed on our face, suffering shocks us awake, forces us to confront things in our hearts that we would otherwise leave dormant. What G was using Bab to do for ancient Jeru. Wanted them to see that their piety mere ritualism: v 1—*not in truth or righteousness*. Yes, you take oaths in my name, but you don't consider what I am like, else you wouldn't renege on your promises so quickly. Yes, you invoke my name & pray to me, but you treat me like a vending machine. More than that, idolatrous: G's charge in v 3–5. In Isr's history he'd made predictions, but peo attributed fulfillment to works of their hands (v 5—*my images, wooden image, metal god*), e.g., Exodus, Red Sea, Mt. Sinai, golden calves. Reveals prob of heart: stubborn (v 4). Oswalt: "stubborn animal, digs in heels, stiffens neck, refuses to be led in a way it does not want to go; all too often only reason is just that that is the way the master wants it to go" (262). We're just like ancient Isr: rituals wo love, attributing blessings to work of our hands, refusing to listen. So G brings adversity to awaken us to our cond (10): not as righteous as we think. If so, our q misguided: if G's peo aren't good, no such thing as "good peo."

In fact follow Isa's line of thinking long enough, q ends up getting flipped on its head: given our real cond, **why do good things happen to G's peo?** Would expect that G would either wipe his hands of whole mess & go his own way, or wipe us all out for our rebellion (22). But G has a bigger purpose in mind: the glory of his own name. What vv 9–11 are all about: *for my own name's sake, sake of my praise, my own sake*. G had attached his name to his peo, so for him either to wipe his hands of them or for him to completely wipe them out would have made Isr & Isr's G an object of ridicule to rest of watching world. Ergo G shows extreme patience/does not give them what they deserve. IOW in face of peo's stubborn rebellion, G shows an even more stubborn grace. G digs in his heels, so to speak, & says, "No! I will not be defamed! I will not let your rebellion be the final word! I will show grace!"

& so G does unthinkable: promises pagan king Cyrus would be instr of G blessing his peo (v 14): *L's chosen ally*, i.e., one Y loves. G promises Cyrus' success (15). But then an enigma (16): scholars debate who says what lines. 1st part clearly G, but what about 2nd part? On one level could certainly refer to Isa: "I'm G's msgr, listen to my words!" But more profoundly I think what's going on here is Isa predicting what Cyrus himself could say: "I've been sent by the L Y, endowed w his Sp from on high to accomplish this mission." But even more to it than that bc both proph Isa & king Cyrus point away to t&g P/t&g K/t&g Serv who is the increasingly dominant Pers in this whole sec of book. To whatever extent Isa & Cyrus could say, *& now the Sov L has sent me, endowed by his Sp*, it pales in comparison to these words on the lips of our LJX. Jn 4.34 (*My food is to do the will of him who sent me & to finish his work*). Jn 8.42 (*I have come here from G. I have not come on my own; G sent me*). Jn 17.3 (*Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true G & JX whom you have sent*). & when you hear these words of Isa 48.16 on lips of J, an amazing reality emerges. Listen again. [Read] Do you hear it? Right there in the mid of the Heb B, there is the Triune G.

But G didn't reveal his nature to communicate abstract truth about himself. Remember, he reveals what he reveals in a historical context to teach us about himself. & the pt he's emphasizing is that his grace is stubborn, will go to whatever extent needed to redeem his peo. Ergo next vs: *directs* = "tread," used of marching ahead, to clear a path for those behind. Ans q of how far G's stubborn grace will go: not just that he shouts down from heaven, "Hey! Go this way!" No, he marches it out ahead of us. What do you have here? Incarnation. Very thing we celebrate during Adv: G taking human form, walking where we walk, not just telling us what to do but marching it out ahead of us. G's stubborn grace does the unthinkable!

But if this is true, if J really was the One Good Pers, only One who followed everything G wanted done, then raises the q I opened this msg w: why did bad things happen to this good pers? But more than that: **why did the worst thing happen to the best Pers?** That prayer I ref'ed a moment ago spoken just hours, maybe mins, before his betrayal, arrest, trials, crucifixion. Condemned as a criminal. If he was the Sent One, Chosen, M, why did he die? To show just how far G's stubborn grace would go. See, just bc G loves his peo doesn't mean that we can sin all we want. Love doesn't cancel justice. Perfection reqs love & it reqs justice. To act wo love would be unjust, to act wo justice would be unloving. So G lets the sword of justice fall on himself. On cross J took blame we deserved, punishment we'd earned. Worst things happened to best Pers so that bad peo—G's peo—would not get what's coming to us. Hope of gos: J lived life we fail to live, died death we should have died, rose again to prove he wasn't the guilty One, prove that he was all he said he was, & to give us hope of new life.

What then do we do in our affliction/suffering/pain?
1. Listen well. 7x in this ch: *listen* or *hear*. 12x in this ch Isa refers to G speaking. CSL: "G whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, shouts in our pains." Go to G's W & listen well.

2. Follow Jesus (v 17). Don't know where to read: go to the gospels, read about J, mark his life, meditate on what he said, contemplate what he did & why he did it. Then by power of his Sp, follow him. He tread out the path for us—path marked by suffering for glory of G. We're his peo. Let us follow him on the way of the cross.

3. Lean forward (v 20). Love this: note impvs. G wants his peo to expect his word will come to pass. Live as if G's promise has already happened, even though Cyrus wouldn't come for another 150+ yrs. G's word so certain that even you can live as if what's not yet fulfilled already has been. Reminder of Eph: arrival of future in X. Cultivate spirit of expectancy, tempered optimism: when we gather, expect good things to happen bc Sov of universe has promised blessing, even in midst of adversity. One of brightest minds in colonial Amer was J Edw: biologist, philosopher, pastor. Preached 1st sermon when just 18 yrs old, msg on Xian happiness. Summarized his sermon this way: "Our bad things will turn out for good, our good things can never be taken from us, & the best things are yet to come." So lean forward. We haven't reached the end of the story. But G has & the ending is good.