

It’s a familiar story, and we’ll get to it in just a moment, but first, I want you to think about a few things. As often as not, our disappointments and frustrations stem from unrealistic expectations. We expect others—including God of course—to act in a certain way. When they don’t, we get upset. Knowing this, we can avoid a lot of frustration and anger by adjusting our expectations. We may be expecting too much. Now, let’s take a closer look at the story.

Luke says Mary and Joseph were on their way to Jerusalem to observe Passover. Of course, they took Jesus and his brothers and sisters with them. What makes this particular pilgrimage unique is that Jesus was twelve years old. Was he a boy or a man? There was no period of adolescence back then. If he was a boy, he’d travel with the women and children. If he was a man, he’d travel with the men. And this sets the stage for what happens: He went missing on the way back to Nazareth.

At first glance, this makes Joseph and Mary look bad—like the old TV commercial: *“It’s 10:00 PM. Do you know where your children are?”* They traveled a whole day before they realized he wasn’t with them. How could this happen? Simple. Families traveled together back then, caravan style. It gave them protection and companionship. They were able to help each other along the way; sharing meals, tending to each other’s kids; assisting the older folks. Also, the men and women didn’t necessarily travel together. The women and children would start out early in the morning walking slowly. The men would leave later in the day and catch up with them by sunset.

Mary and Joseph weren’t negligent. But they were distraught. Have you ever had a child wander off? It’s a nerve-wracking experience. When our kids were little, we took them to the Beaver Valley Mall to see all the Christmas lights and the guy in the red suit. Our older son, Christopher, was four years old. Jayne was pushing Jeremy in the stroller, and I wandered into a bookstore with who I thought was Christopher by my side. I looked down only to find somebody else’s kid standing beside me. “Christopher?” I called. No answer. I

rushed to Jayne out in the mall and ask, “Honey, is Christopher with you?” “I thought he was with you,” she answered. We panicked. The mall was packed with shoppers. She went in one direction, and I went in the other. We looked everywhere. No sign of our 4-year-old. We met back at the center of the mall. I scanned in every direction. Suddenly, I got an inspiration. I bolted to the door we entered, and there I found one small, brave little four-year-old, looking toward the exit door we had come through a short time before, waiting for someone to open it. Jayne and Jeremy were waiting for us on the other side of the mall atrium. We group-hugged and with a huge sigh of relief we laughed (and maybe cried) until we collected ourselves and felt brave enough to go on and do a little shopping...all four of us...TOGETHER.

Mary and Joseph traveled a full day before realizing that Jesus wasn't in their caravan. We'd better believe they spent a sleepless night before heading back to Jerusalem the next day! When they got back, they combed the city. They finally found him among the elders in the Temple. They must have been both relieved and furious—thankful that he was all right—and mad as a hornet that he pulled such a stunt.

*“Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you”* (v. 48) asks Mary. Jesus answers his mother's question with his own question (something he frequently does throughout the Gospels). Verse 49 records that he asks, *“Why were you searching for me?” “Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?”* Well, of course.

From this experience they learn one of the most important lessons of life: Our children are not simply *our children*; they're ultimately *God's children*, and it's to God whom they ultimately belong; and it is to God whom they owe their ultimate loyalty. Jesus' response was simple but firm: *“Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?”* Then he left the elders and went with them to Nazareth, where Luke says, *“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man”* (v. 52).

But wait! Let's not miss the subtle expectations. Up to this point, Mary and Joseph expected Jesus to conform to the social conventions of the day. Whether he was regarded as a child or as a man, they expected him to be in his place. When he failed to meet their expectations, *that's when the trouble began: Why have you treated us like this?* We can avoid a lot of frustration and anger by readjusting our expectations of people, not only with regard to our children, family, friends, but, just as importantly, with our relationship to God.

How many times have we thought to ourselves, if not said out loud, "*God, why have you treated me like this? How could you let this happen?*" This fall we gave a lot of attention to the folks in North Carolina and Florida who suffered from the devastating impact of hurricanes Helene and Milton. I'm sure the folks in North Carolina and Florida are thankful for the assistance they received, some of it from western Pennsylvania. But don't you think the question still lingers: "*God, why have you treated us like this?*"

Hundreds of families lost everything. Churches were destroyed. It will take years to recover and rebuild in places like Asheville, NC. Even sitting here, safe and secure and miles away, we wonder: How could a just and merciful God allow such a thing to happen? Of course, Helene and Milton are only a few examples. Worldwide, we hear of earthquakes and tsunamis and floods that take thousands of lives in a matter of minutes. On a personal level, we all know of individuals—including innocent children—struck down by cancer and other life-threatening diseases. What are we to make of this?

We might expect bad things to happen if victims of these disasters were living sinful lives. We would say, "They only got what they deserved." But we know that's not the answer. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Those who suffer are no less righteous in God's sight than those who don't.

You'd think that, if we live responsibly and play by the rules, we would get a fair shake. But that's not how it works. Accidents, disasters, and disease strike indiscriminately. There's no rhyme or reason to it. When they strike, it's only

natural to wonder where God is in all this. We expect God to do better; and we're not alone. Here's what the writer of the 44<sup>th</sup> Psalm has to say:

*In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever. But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies. You made us retreat before the enemy, and our adversaries have plundered us. You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations. You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale. You have made us a reproach to our neighbors, the scorn and derision of those around us. You have made us a byword among the nations; the peoples shake their heads at us... Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love.*

(Psalm 44:8-14 & 24-26)

Years ago, a book by Rabbi Harold Kushner came out titled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. By the way, it's still in print for \$8.58 on Amazon.

**Why do bad things happen to good people?** It's one of life's greatest mysteries. At least in part, the answer is to stop trying to explain everything and readjust our expectations. If you expect God to play favorites and grant you immunity from suffering and loss, you're going to be sadly disappointed and angry. Only as we're willing to let God be God and accept the fact that life runs its own course, will we ever be confident in knowing that God will give us the grace we need to live a full and fulfilling life, regardless of our circumstances.

I like what Larry Lawrence once said. Someone asked him how he felt about having cancer, and he replied, "Why should I be any different?" Personally, it gives me great comfort to know God is in charge—not me, or you, or the government, or anyone else. Anyway, if it were up to us, we'd be up to our ears in alligators in a flash. We would be much like the people of Hydropolis in the story of the rainmaker. Do you know that story? Here's the short version: Rolf Svenson was an inventor. At least some said he was. Regardless, after ninety days without rain, everyone looked to him for help. They had to twist his arm, but he consented to making a rainmaker, which to the naked eye looked like an

old boiler on wheels, with a maze of pipes and valves going every which way and a smokestack on the top. He wheeled it down to the town square and fired it up. When it got good and hot, steam started pouring out the smokestack. A small cloud formed up in the sky. The cloud grew and grew and got darker and darker until someone saw a flash and heard a clap of thunder. Sure enough, it began to rain—not just a drop or two but pouring rain. The people clapped and danced and got soaking wet. It felt so good and they were very very happy.

Once the ground was good and wet, old Svenson shut off the rainmaker and wheeled it back to his barn. The people of Hydropolis loved it. They now had rain on demand. The problem was they couldn't decide how much rain was enough. They argued. When the city council called a town hall meeting to discuss the issue it turned into a donnybrook. Everyone shouted and called each other names. Some wanted to fight. Svenson knew he'd made a mistake.

But no one noticed old Svenson and his crazy rainmaker out on the lawn. No one had any idea, until it was too late. They rushed outside to find the rainmaker running full steam. Old man Svenson had taken the valves off and thrown them away. He was nowhere to be found. He had fired up the machine and walked away, never to return. Well, it rained, and it rained, until the whole countryside flooded. The town lake filled to overflowing. Then the dam broke. The little village was washed away. To this day, when people pass by and see the ruins, it reminds them of how foolish we are to think that we can take matters into our own hands, instead of trusting God to order and provide.

To God's holy people in Rome, Paul writes: "*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose...*" (Romans 8:28). This is not an explanation for why bad things happen, nor does it take away the pain of our grief and loss, but it does help us see the bigger picture; that God is sovereign over all creation, and that God has given us all we will ever need for a full and fulfilling life. That's the key—to know the peace and power of God's love in Jesus Christ. Once we do, we'll be able to weather any storm. May God bless this simple witness to his word.

Amen.