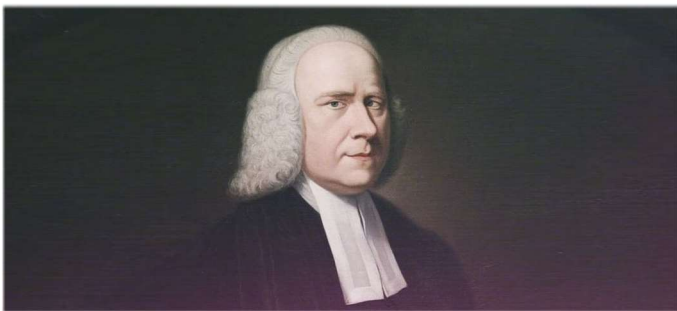


When Good Things Happen Through Bad People



Remember Rabbi Harold Kushner's bestseller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*? In that book, he was trying to explain the great conundrum of why God allows seemingly good people to suffer. Well, this week I felt I was confronted by a similarly vexing question: why does God allow good things to happen *through* bad people?

Two disturbing articles got my attention. Both were about historically revered Christian leaders who turned out to be pretty depraved. So depraved in fact, it's hard to understand how God could have used them so profoundly to enhance the lives of others.



George Whitefield – slavery advocate

George Whitefield isn't exactly a household name these days, but he was probably the most famous American religious figure of the eighteenth century. In the mid-1700s, he was one of the primary evangelists of the Great Awakening. A flamboyant preacher capable of commanding audiences of thousands through the sheer power of his oratory, he is said to have preached at least 18,000 times to perhaps 10 million hearers.

And yet, in a powerful article, *Was George Whitefield a Christian?*, Jared C. Wilson recently outlined the great evangelist's dark history with slavery.

According to Wilson, while Whitefield initially spoke out against slave-holding, his views changed as his fame grew. He had established an orphanage in the Georgia colony and saw the great benefit in using slave labor to expand and maintain it.

The only problem was that Georgia originally did not allow slavery. Wilson wrote,

“Whitefield actually advocated for it [in Georgia]. There’s even good evidence that he brought slaves there two years before slavery was legalized! Therefore, Whitefield was not merely a slave-holder or a slavery-advocate — he was instrumental in the institution of slavery in the Georgia colony. He was complicit in this great evil.”



Martin Luther King – unfaithful husband

For decades, rumors have abounded of the FBI's evidence of sexual infidelity by Dr Martin Luther King. No one has doubted that Dr King was unfaithful to his wife, but his indiscretions have long been viewed in light of his colossal reputation as a civil rights advocate.

That was until recently, when the FBI released a large tranche of **archived material** related to their investigation into King.

The archive purports to show that Martin Luther King had sexual encounters with dozens of women, including with prostitutes, that he pressured female parishioners into having sex, that he participated in orgies, and allegedly watched a fellow Baptist pastor rape a woman inside a hotel room.

While there's good reason to doubt a "secret" FBI file, one of Dr King's biographers, Pulitzer Prize winner, David Garrow, has read the material and reported, "I always thought there were 10-12 other women, not 40-45." No one can deny the extraordinary good work done by both Whitefield and King. Many people in both Britain and North America became Christians through the ministry of George Whitefield. And the rights and freedoms afforded to black Americans as a result of Dr King's campaigns have literally changed countless lives and inspired millions around the world.

So, Does Character Just Not Matter?

In the pietistic tradition of which I'm part, it's always assumed that a person's character has direct bearing on their effectiveness in ministry. The more holy you were, the more God could use you for his glory. At least that's the theory.

But the historical revelations about extremely 'effective' leaders continues to shake that assumption. I could regale you with stories of evangelists and megachurch pioneers using funds defrauded from followers through insurance scams and securities fraud to build their ministries, or having multiple affairs (one even faked her own kidnapping to run away with a lover), or sexually abusing or harassing women, or bullying colleagues, or accruing outrageous levels of personal wealth, and on and on. Now, add Whitefield and King to that list.

Sexual infidelity, slave-holding, assault, fraud, bullying, mismanagement, and the loss of faith — any of these would be enough to disqualify you from holding a leadership position in a Christian church or organisation. But so many of them continued to serve in their ministries until their deaths. More than that, they remained greatly effective in those ministries.

Are we to conclude that God is no great respecter of our perceived holiness? Will he use *anyone* for his purposes, no matter their depravity, their immorality, or their lack of faith?

In his article on Whitefield, Jared Wilson distils some things we can learn from such revelations about great leaders. These include warnings to recognise

the temptation that comes with great power, and the need to take care lest we too fall. But he also suggests we need to develop a “hermeneutic of grace regarding history”:

“Think of how many of the sinful patriarchs — whose collective sins include adultery and sexual exploitation, abuse of power and drunkenness, even murder — are lauded for their faith. Very few heroes of the Old Testament would not be able to find their sins listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10... But with both Testaments testifying to both the reality of grievous sin and the reality of a great Savior, we see the grounds for reading history with a ‘hermeneutic of grace’.”

In short, no, our character isn’t some inhibitor to whether God in his grace will work through us for his purposes.

It might be true to tweet, “**There is no such thing as a godly misogynist**” (or slave-holder or serial adulterer), but the shocking nature of grace is that God has used such people for his glory.

The Graced and the Ungraced

Wilson isn’t whitewashing the sins of great heroes or saying our choices don’t matter. There are too many injunctions in Scripture for God’s people to be holy for him to do that. What he is saying is that God’s grace abounds in the lives of even the greatest sinners.

Last week, I heard a colleague preach on the *Book of Esther*, a troublesome part of the Old Testament if ever there was one.

A beautiful young Jewish exile, Hadassah is brought into the harem of the Persian King Xerxes, where she rises to prominence after the deposing of Queen Vashti. Not to put too fine a point on it, but Hadassah, renamed Esther, has to, ahem, *out-perform* the king’s other mistresses in order to secure her status as Xerxes’ consort. (They never taught you that in Sunday School, did they?)

What follows is a terrifying tale of palace intrigue, political machinations, threats of genocide, and, at the end, a brutal massacre followed by a feast. It reads more like an episode of *Game of Thrones* than part of the Bible. And, of course, throughout it all, God’s name is never mentioned. Yahweh is simply never seen.

The closest we get to observing God’s unseen hand at work is when Esther’s guardian-cousin, Mordecai begs her to use her access to Xerxes to intervene in the impending destruction of all the Jews in Persia.

It was at Mordecai's original suggestion that Esther has kept her Jewish identity a secret from the king. Now Mordecai insists she put herself at great risk by speaking up for her people. And he does so by using the most famous line in the *Book of Esther*: **“And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”** (4:14)

Esther is a secret Jew, living in opulence as a Persian queen, having slept her way into the king's good graces. There's nothing in the early sections of her story that indicates any moral greatness or religious devotion. While the queen-consort isn't a position of any influence (her lack of regular access to the king is revealed when she puts her plan in motion), she nonetheless profits from the subjugation of Persia's peasants, including the Jewish exiles.

But her single act of advocating for her people, at great personal risk, appears to cover a multitude of past sins. Like Samson's suicide, or Rahab's treason, or Cyrus' edict, being on the side of God or God's people is enough.

And when you think about it, that's grace. That's God's undeserved favour upon the sinner.

I'm hearing evangelicals saying that Donald Trump is like this. He's a modern-day King Cyrus or Queen Esther, having been placed in a position of authority “for such a time as this” to speak up for God's people and fulfil God's plans for America.

But where it's hard to see God's grace at work is in the lives of Whitefield's slaves or Martin Luther King's sexual conquests. Or the victims of the avarice of megachurch pastors.

It's one thing to say God's grace was at work through Dr King or President Trump despite their crimes and indiscretions, but what of God's grace for those immigrant children separated from their parents at the border, or for Muslim refugees lost in diplomatic limbo, or for chronically ill children unable to access government medical benefits? Where is God's grace for the victims of Mr Trump's sexual appetites?

God's grace, like rain, falls on the just and the unjust alike. But let us not be so focused on finding that grace in the lives of sinful leaders, that we can't find it and demonstrate it in the broken lives of the enslaved, the asylum seeker, the rape victim, the poor and the outcast.

by Michael Frost