

14th century archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Bradwardine's story about God's sovereign rule taken from Mark Jones *God Is: A Devotional Guide to the Attributes of God* p. 123-125

Why do good things happen to bad people and why do bad things happen to good people? Strictly speaking, there has only ever been one good person [Jesus Christ] who has had bad things happen to him, and he volunteered! But the Scriptures are filled with examples of good things happening to bad people (Mal. 3:15; Ps. 73:3), as well as some really bad things happening to "good" people (Joseph, Daniel, Jesus, Ps. 44:22).

Perhaps a story from the brilliant 14thC archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Bradwardine (from his *De Causa Dei contra pelagium*), will help us to understand this delicate theological problem, and offer some hope to those who have suffered a great deal in their Christian lives:

Once upon a time there was a hermit who was thinking that the wicked received the good and the righteous received evil. He began to doubt the existence of a good God. He gave up his solitary life and wandered through the world. While doing this, an angel, in the form of a man, joined him.

First, together they met somebody who met them politely and treated them very well with accommodation.

Rising a midnight the angel took a golden cup from the host and went away with the hermit.

Second, they stayed with someone else who equally treated them well. Rising at midnight with the hermit the angel went to the cradle and strangled the baby.

Third, they met someone who did not let them stay in his home, but rather outside. In the morning the angel knocked on the door and gave the wicked man a golden cup, which he had stolen from the first good man they had stayed with.

Fourth, they came to a man who treated them most kindly. When the angel and hermit were about to leave, the angel asked the host to send his servant with

them to show them the way to go. When they reached a bridge over the rapid waters, the angel threw the servant into the river.

The hermit wanted to leave this apparently wicked angel.

But the angel told the hermit to wait and listen how everything happened according to God's just order: The angel was an angel of God to teach the hermit that many things that seem unjust to humans are very good.

The first man they met whom they took the cup from profited because, before possessing the cup, he feared God. But after getting the cup he became drunk every day with that cup. God sent the angel to remove this incentive to drunkenness in order that the man be saved.

To the third man whom I gave the golden cup, that is, the wicked man who did not give hospitality, the angel did much harm to him, even though he appeared to outwardly prosper. This man became a drunk once in possession of the cup. God gave him the cup as a sign of judgement, even though he thought he prospered.

Regarding the man whose child I killed, he was generous to the poor before he had his son. But after having a son he no longer treated the poor or cared for them. God ordered that the angel kill the child so that the man would no longer endanger his eternal salvation and return to his previous life of generosity.

Regarding the servant whom the angel threw over into the rushing waters, that servant was about to murder his kind master and his family, including his wife and child, that night. But the Lord loved this family and so prevented that evil.

Then the angel said: "Off you go and stop judging divine providence in the wrong way, because you see bad things happen to good people and good things to bad people."