
WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEEOPLE

I want to teach what for many of you will be a new word: theodicy.

- The roots of the word are *Theos* for “GOD” and *dike* for “justice”.
 - The term literally means “justifying GOD,” as in GOD who punishes evil and blesses good.
- But it has come to refer to the question of how a loving, almighty, and all-knowing GOD permits evil.
 - Why does a good and loving GOD allow so much suffering in the world?
 - Or to put it more theologically, “Is suffering connected to our behavior?”
 - “Does GOD cause suffering?”
 - “Is suffering or calamity a form of punishment?”
 - “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

These questions are usually asked in moment of extreme suffering and loss.

- They are as emotional as they are important.

“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?”

- If JESUS didn’t ask this question, others surely would have.

We are well aware of those who view tragedies as deserved, those who link calamities with hidden sins that need avenging.

- Surely AIDS is GOD’s punishment on homosexuals.
- Hurricanes must be GOD’s judgment on the loose living people of New Orleans.
- The 2010 earthquake in Haiti was GOD’s penalty on those people because of the pact they made with the devil.
 - So has said Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and others.
- And it would be easy to say similar things about Muslims who died in Christ Church, New Zealand three years ago.
 - And we can point to many other times God has apparently judged and punished those who were unfaithful or immoral.

But what then do we say when 20 six- and seven-year-olds and their teachers were gunned down in Sandy Hook?

- Or when 9 Christians in Charlottesville were shot and killed during a Bible study—though they were black, right? (Or so I’ve heard some say.)
 - But that’s what we do.

We try to make sense of disasters and devastations and heinous acts of hate.

- And in our attempts to understand, to put these events into a perspective that somehow makes them more palatable or comprehensible, we all too often find ourselves doing the very thing we despise—
 - locating explanations for such ruin and wreckage in that which provides more convenience of comfort.
 - Because, while we know it’s not true, we also know that there’s a deep-down place inside us all that wonders, that questions, what about me?
 - Am I so much better to have been spared—at least so far?

Or, when we experience pain or suffering or loss, especially in the extreme, we begin to ask, "What did I do?"

- Could I have done something differently?
 - Why is this happening to me?
 - What justifies this suffering?
 - What did I do wrong?
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In JESUS' day, it was easy to know who deserved GOD's judgment.

- The poor were poor, the sick were sick, the suffering suffered because they had done something to displease GOD—
 - either they or their parents or grandparents.
- And the rich and the healthy were in such condition because they had earned GOD's favor. *Now there were some present at that time who told JESUS about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.*
- When Pilate came to rule as governor, he had Roman shields hung in the Jewish temples.
 - And when people in Galilee tore down those shield and banners and burned them, Pilate had many of them killed.

So, JESUS asks, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?"

Why do bad things happen to good people?

- There are several things I want to say about suffering and loss and the cause of evil.
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First, suffering is *not* a form of punishment.

- If there is anything we can take from JESUS' sharp retort to His audience, it's that suffering and calamity are not GOD's punishment for sin.

Just to make sure the crowd listening gets the point, JESUS goes on to offer a second example of folks killed when a tower fell on them, asking, "Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?"

- In both cases, JESUS answers with a definitive, "No."
 - Suffering is not a form of punishment.
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Second, just because suffering is not a punishment doesn't mean that it is disconnected entirely from sin.

- Pilate's murderous acts of terror, as well as the horrific actions of today's news are sinful.
 - These are the actions of people who have chosen their own will over GOD's will.
 - Sin has consequences, and there are all kinds of bad behaviors that contribute to much of the misery in the world,
 - and the more we can confront that sin, the less suffering there will be.
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Alfred Nobel was the generous donor who established the Nobel Peace Prize and others.

- Nobel made his fortune from his invention of dynamite and from his role as an iron and steel producer to a major manufacturer of canon and other armaments.

In his last will and testament, Nobel set aside the bulk of his estate to establish the Nobel Prizes to be given to "the person or society that renders the greatest service to the cause of international fraternity, in the suppression or reduction of standing armies, or in the establishment of furtherance of peace congresses."

- Nobel did not want to be remembered for contributing to the deaths of people but for supporting those who contributed to life and to peace.

And that brings us to a third and very important thing we can see from this passage:

- GOD neither causes nor delights in suffering and calamity.

This is where the parable about the fig tree comes in.

Now, a quick warning: we tend to read this parable allegorically, assuming that the landowner is GOD and the gardener is JESUS.

- But nowhere in Luke do we find a picture of an angry, vindictive GOD that needs to be calmed by a friendly JESUS.

- Rather, JESUS portrays GOD as a father who scans the horizon day in and day out waiting for HIS wayward son to come home,

- and as a woman who, after sweeping her house all night looking for a lost coin, throws a party costing even more than the coin is worth to celebrate that she found it.

Given that Luke's Gospel overflows with the conviction that *"there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance,"*

- then perhaps the landowner is representative of our own sense of how the world should work.

- That is, from very early on, we want things to be "fair" and we define "fair" as receiving rewards for doing good and punishment for doing evil.

(Except, of course, when it comes to our own mistakes and misdeeds.)

- So perhaps the gardener is GOD, the ONE who consistently raises a contrary voice to suggest that the ultimate answer to sin isn't punishment—not even in the name of justice—but rather mercy, reconciliation, and new life.

That image is given to us as a model for how we need to live in the world, and folks, we've got a lot to do.

- Some time ago, I had a conversation with a former police officer who told me that every day he went to work, he knew that he might not come home.

- The week before I spoke with this former officer, I talked with a high school student who told me the same thing.

To accomplish this work of mercy, reconciliation, and new life, we need to change the way we look at people.

- We need to see people—all people—as GOD's children, just as we are, dearly loved by our heavenly FATHER.

- Instead of just as Muslims, we need to see those fifty people in Christ Church who were killed and fifty more who were wounded as people like us who simply wanted to go to worship.

- As were the eleven in Philadelphia who died going to worship in a synagogue.

- And the nine in a church in Charlotte.

- Once we stop labeling and categorizing people and start seeing each other as GOD's, we will have made significant progress toward reducing suffering in our world.

And we need to start thinking about our situation and the situations of others differently, too.

- Often, and especially around election time, we ask ourselves, “Is my situation better than it was two years or four years ago?”
 - I think though, that the question we should be asking before every election ought to be, “Is my neighbor’s situation better than it was two or four years ago?”
 - Because, you see, such a question takes into consideration the fact that our neighbor, who is also our brother or sister, deserves as good a life as we have,
 - and when our neighbor struggles, we cannot dismiss it consciously or unconsciously as simply GOD’s judgment on them.
 - Because if we do, we must also ask what we deserve from GOD.
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Rather than imagine that GOD has to punish someone—and that we’re just lucky that JESUS was around—what if instead we recognize that GOD’s answer to sin isn’t punishment but instead is love.

- That is, in JESUS, GOD loves us enough to take on our lot and our lives fully, identifying with us completely.
 - In the cross, then, we see just how far GOD is willing to go to be with us and for us, even to the point of suffering unjustly and dying the death of a criminal.
 - And in the resurrection, we see that GOD’s solidarity and love is stronger than anything, even death.
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So, what can we say in the face of suffering and loss?

- That GOD is with us.
- That GOD understands what suffering is like.
- That GOD has promised to redeem all things, including even our suffering.
- That suffering and injustice do not have the last word in our lives and world.
- That GOD will keep waiting for us and keep urging us to turn away from our self-destructive habits to be drawn again to the embrace of a loving GOD.
- And that, as the parable of the fig tree tells us, there is yet more time—
 - more time to turn; more time to love; more time to give; more time to live into the way of relationship that GOD intends.
 - So, Christians, let’s do it.