

INTRODUCTION

Today, I want to speak to you on “Why Do Good People Suffer?” I’ve preached on suffering before. In fact, one lady wrote me a note reading, “Pastor, I never knew what suffering was until I heard you preach. Now I know.” Some preaching is like suffering. Once a long-winded preacher had been going about an hour and didn’t seem anywhere close to ending. He said, “I’m really on a roll here, and there’s a lot more that I want to say, but Jesus has just told me to stop, so let’s end the service. Jesus has told me to end my message.” The song leader said, “Let’s stand and sing, ‘What a friend we have in Jesus.’”

On a day in which we celebrate the resurrection, you may wonder why I am speaking about suffering. Those of you who come every Sunday know I don’t really choose my sermon topics, because I preach through the Bible verse after verse. God, who wrote the Bible, really gives me my preaching plan. The calendar or my own interests don’t drive my messages. This great passage is next in Luke and I think it’s a perfect Easter topic. If you go into a jewelry store and ask to look at diamonds, the salesperson won’t display the diamonds on the glass case, they will place them on a piece of black cloth or velvet. Against that dark background the brilliance and beauty of the diamond can best be seen. The glory of the resurrection shines more brightly displayed against the dark background of our suffering.

This is a message about terrorists and falling towers. Everybody still talks about that day; it was a day of tragedy and injustice. People were going about their business when they were suddenly and brutally killed. And what about the tower that fell suddenly? Towers remind us of strength and security—and when a tower falls and people are killed, we feel a little less secure. The initial reaction was shock; then we began to ask the inevitable questions: Why were those innocent people killed? Why did the tower fall? Where was God during all of that?

Most of you think I’m talking about 9/11, and everything I’ve said *does* apply, but I’m really talking about 13:1. Luke 13:1. 2,000 years ago, Jesus talked about some innocent people who died at the hands of what could be called terrorists—and He talked about a tower that fell and killed people. In fact, the similarities between 13:1 and 9/11 are amazing. The same questions people are asking today were being asked 2,000 years ago. But more importantly, the *answer* Jesus gives is the same answer we need to hear.

Now there were some present at the time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Then he relayed this parable: “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care for the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

The Holy Spirit of Jesus is present with us today, but if He was here in the flesh, we could sit down in front of Him and ask, “Jesus, what about those 254 passengers who were killed on those hijacked airliners? And what about those 3,000 people killed when the World Trade Center was attacked? And while we’re on the subject, what about those 22 people killed in Natanya this week as they were preparing for the Passover meal?” He would look at you with those eyes that you would never forget and say, “Do you suppose those 254 people were worse sinners than anybody else who has ever gotten on an airliner? Or those 3,000 in New York City or those 22 in Natanya—were they worse people than anybody else? NO—but unless you repent, you will perish, too.” You may not like His answer, or His non-answer. You come with a deep, troubling philosophical question, “Why do good people suffer?” and He basically refuses to answer it; instead He turns the question into a statement about your own spiritual condition. A conversation with Jesus is never boring!

It’s okay to ask the question about suffering. Christianity and the Bible can easily endure the light of honest intellectual scrutiny; it has for 200 centuries. So, you don’t have to check your brain at the door when you come to church. This idea of suffering has puzzled us for centuries. There is an entire theological or philosophical study called *theodicy*. It asks the simple question: If God is entirely good, and entirely powerful—why is there suffering? Some people look at what the Bible says about God and then look around in the world and say, “The character of God and the reality of suffering contradict each other!” What’s the answer?

In addition to all my other reading, I try to re-read some of the great literary classics. This past year I read *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. It is a deeply spiritual book because Defoe was a committed Christian who wrote hymns and Christian poetry. When Defoe’s character, Robinson Crusoe, is shipwrecked on an island, he discovers a native and names him Friday. He teaches him to speak English and He teaches Him about God and about the importance of trusting Jesus Christ for salvation. In one of their theological discussions, the following dialogue occurs: Friday to Robinson Crusoe: “But if God much strong, much more than devil, why God no kill the devil so make him no more do evil?” Crusoe’s reply: “You may as well ask, why God no kill you and me when we do wicked things”

That short conversation provides both the question and a good response to the problem of theodicy, the question of, “How can a loving, powerful God allow evil? In light of 9/11 and in light of the resurrection of Jesus, let’s learn four important things about suffering.

1. SUFFERING IS PART OF A FALLEN WORLD

There was no suffering in the Garden of Eden. But when our ancestors, Adam and Eve chose to disobey a loving God, suffering became a reality. We are still living in a world affected by the results of sin. After a nuclear explosion, “fallout” lingers for many years. Even, so we are still living in the “fallout” from the fall of man. God is not the source of evil; Satan and sin are responsible. Human suffering is produced from two different sources, both of which Jesus addresses in Luke 13.

First, we live in a world full of **MORAL EVIL**. We have to share this planet with some wicked people. Pilate was a cruel Roman governor. One day some Galileans were in the Temple getting ready to make their sacrifices. Pilate did not trust the Jews, so he had Roman soldiers disguised as Jews to intermingle with them. For some unknown reason, on a certain day, Pilate gave the order to massacre a group of worshipers. The Jews were still outraged that Pilate would mingle the blood of the worshipers with their sacrifices.

The world has always had to deal with cruel, wicked people like Pilate. Whether it's Hitler ordering the death of 6 million Jews, or the gunman rushing into Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, or the misguided religious zeal of the Muslim terrorists who hijacked those jets - this world is just full of mean people. After 9/11, President Bush said we have seen the face of pure evil—I agree.

The Bible speaks of the depravity of the human heart. “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9) Jesus said, “For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery...” (Mark 7:21) Look no further than your pocket or purse. If you have any kind of a key with you today, it is a testimony to the fact we have to lock things up, or some mean person will steal your car or your possessions. As I've said before, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. Man is basically a sinner who has to have a life-transforming encounter with God to become a better person. Don't blame God for the actions of wicked people. When God created us, He gave us the freedom to choose, and some people choose to commit acts of evil and violence.

A second source of suffering is that we also live in a world of **NATURAL EVIL**. Sometimes we suffer and it's not because of some wicked person, it could be what we call accidents and disasters. You could even include disease in this category. Why are there tornados, earthquakes, or accidents in which people are hurt or die? Why is there cancer, infection, and disease? It's because we live in a fallen, messed up world. When Adam and Eve sinned, they opened a Pandora's box of troubles for them and for their descendants. Have you ever heard the world's shortest poem? It's called “Troubles” and here's the poem: “Troubles—Adam had 'em!” He had plenty of troubles—and so do we.

The World Trade Towers fell because of evil men flying fuel-laden jetliners into them. We don't really know *why* the tower of Siloam fell; we just know 18 people died. Perhaps it was human error—it wasn't built well. Or perhaps it's one of the unavoidable accidents occurring in life.

Romans 8:22 says, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” This is a beautiful world in many ways—the spacious skies, the amber waves of grain; the purple mountain's majesty ... but it is also a world that is not perfect. The Bible says the very creation itself has been whacked out of kilter; you can almost hear it groaning like a woman in pain. Creation isn't running right because of sin. One day, creation itself will be fixed and redeemed but for the time being we have to live in an imperfect world where there are storms, accidents, and disease. Don't blame God: we messed it up.

Tony Evans says, “Have you ever cleaned up your house in preparation of receiving guests or visitors and when they arrive, they begin to mess up your house? You know it’s a good house; it’s just been messed up by these visitors. This can be annoying! Now think about how God feels about mankind messing up His perfect Creation!”

2. SUFFERING IS UNRELATED TO GOODNESS

The question in the minds of Jesus’ audience was, “Why did those people suffer and die from Pilate’s cruelty or from the tower falling?” The assumption was they must have been bad people to suffer like that. There is a tendency for us to look at someone when they are suffering and to think, “Maybe they are just getting what they deserve.”

In John 9, Jesus was walking along when he saw a blind man. His disciples asked Him, “Master who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind?” Don’t we sometimes think the same way? What did this person do to deserve their suffering? Pay attention to what Jesus told His disciples, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned that he was born blind, but this happened that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” (John 9:1-3) We still make the same false assumption today.

Jesus asks, “Do you think those upon whom the tower fell were worst sinners than you? No!” That kind of thinking assaults our sense of fairness or justice. We think *bad* people should be the ones to suffer and *good* people shouldn’t. But that’s not the way it works. Let’s consider the title of this sermon again: Why do good people suffer? It’s actually not a very good question, because none is *good* in the first place! Once a man approached Jesus and called Him “good.” Notice Jesus’ reply in Luke 18:19: “Why do you call me *good*?” Jesus answered. “No one is *good*—except God alone.” The Psalmist says, “There is *none* good—no not one.” (Psalm 14:1) God is good all the time, but I don’t think any of us can claim that designation for ourselves. I’m a sinner saved by grace. We want to know why bad things happen to good people; we’re asking the wrong question.

The great theologian and writer, R.C. Sproul wrote, “In effect what Jesus was saying was this: “You people are asking the wrong question. You should be asking me, ‘Why didn’t that tower fall on MY head?’” (*The Holiness of God*, p. 161)

Maybe you’ve pondered the mystery of, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Have you ever stopped to wonder, “Why do *good* things happen to bad people—like me?” Suffering is no respecter of persons, at one time everyone will suffer—the good, the bad, the ugly.

In fact, the Bible promises those who follow Christ WILL suffer. But the good news is that any suffering we endure in this world is only temporary. The Bible says in Romans 8:17-18, “We share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Yes, we will suffer in this life—but this life is not all there is!

To understand this better, I’d like to quote the great theologian, Edith Bunker. Some of you remember the 1970s sitcom “All in the Family” that addressed every subject under the sun—and

then some. On one episode they even addressed the reality of suffering and belief in God. Here’s the conversation:

Michael: “Tell me, Archie, if there is a God, why is this world messed up?”

Archie: “Why do I always have to give the answers? Edith, tell this dumb Polack why, if has created the world, it’s in such a mess?”

Edith: “Well, I suppose it’s to make us appreciate heaven better when we get there.”

In the midst of a funny show, the writers actually wrote something profound in the script.

Perhaps the writers wanted the audience to think most Christians were simplistic “dingbats” like Edith—but for whatever reason, I say, “good answer” to Edith. There will be NO suffering in heaven. Do you know for certain you’ll spend eternity there? Here’s how you *can* be certain.

3. SUFFERING AMPLIFIES GOD’S MESSAGE: “REPENT OR PERISH!”

When asked why Pilate killed the people or why the 18 died when the tower fell, Jesus gave the same reply twice: “unless you *repent* you will likewise perish.” Go ahead, ask Him again, “Jesus, why are there terrorists who steal airplanes and bring towers crashing down?” He would tell you, “Wrong question—but unless *you* repent, you will also perish!” That’s His message: repent or perish!

Every person is born with an instinct to worship, to relate to Someone greater and more powerful than the human species. Consequently, man has devised a wide range of gods and deities and worshiped in many different ways. When God sent Jesus, He was sending the final, authoritative revelation of Himself. Once, Paul was speaking to a group of intellectual giants in Athens. He had seen all their statues and gods—and they had one unnamed shrine that simply said, “to the unknown God.” Paul took it as an opportunity to tell them that the “unknown God” was the true God—and His name is Jesus. He said in Acts 17:29-31: “We should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all men everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world by the man He has appointed. He has given *proof* of this to all men by raising Him from the dead.” The Resurrection of Jesus was God’s stamp of approval on the Deity of Jesus.

To repent means to change your mind, and then change your behavior. It’s a word that means to turn. If you are driving down the highway and a passenger said, “turn right,” you might choose to turn the steering wheel to the right and change direction. That’s a good picture of the Bible word for “repent.” You change your mind about your direction and then you change your direction. To repent means you turn *from* sin, and you turn to Jesus. Repentance is not a single action; it is a lifestyle. We must be continually repenting throughout our lives if we want to be right with God. When I read in the Bible that I’m thinking a way the Bible says is wrong, I need to repent immediately. If I read in the Scriptures that I should be doing something I’m not doing, I need to repent and start doing it.

Repentance is not easy because the first step in repentance is admitting you are wrong—and that is not a natural human tendency. Most of us have been right down to an art. God uses many tools to call us to repentance, even our suffering.

The great Christian intellectual C.S. Lewis wrote: “Pain insists upon being attended to; God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” (*The Problem of Pain*, p. 22)

One reason you can hear my voice this morning is because I’m speaking into a microphone that feeds a signal to an amplifier. It makes the sound of my voice louder. Without this amplifier, I wouldn’t be able to communicate this message to many of you. When everything is going wonderful in your life, you may not think you need God. But suffering gets our attention and reminds us that we cannot make it without God.

Some of you are suffering right now. You aren’t suffering because you are a worst sinner than the rest of us. And some of you are doing great right now, no complaints. That doesn’t mean you are better than the person sitting next to you who is hurting. Now God doesn’t create evil or suffering, but He will certainly *use* the suffering that is a part of this fallen world to call you to repent. Is there something you need to change your mind about today, and then change your behavior? God may be shouting to you, Repent! Repent!” Are you listening? One final thought:

4. GOD IS EXTENDING YOUR GRACE PERIOD ANOTHER DAY!

On the surface, you may think the little story about the fig tree is unrelated to what Jesus is saying about suffering and repentance but He uses it as a powerful story to illustrate His point. The owner of the farm is God, and the fig tree is Israel. God is ready to cut the fig tree down, because for three years there is no fruit but He decides to give it another season to see if it will become fruitful. You can’t miss the point. Jesus had been preaching for three years, and within a few months, He would go to the cross. Israel had not yet become fruitful in accepting the Messiah, so God was giving them a longer period to repent and accept Jesus. The message is the same to us today. If you haven’t trusted Jesus as your Savior yet, God is giving you another chance to surrender to Him.

Some insurance policies have what is called a “grace period.” If you don’t pay your premium on time, the insurance company extends your coverage for a short period of time, hoping you’ll pay the premium. But if you don’t pay the premium, the grace period runs out and the policy will be cancelled. God has a grace period, too, and you’re in it today. We are living in the age of grace today. Salvation is absolutely free—but there is a limit to your grace period. You are facing a Divine Deadline. It could be one of two deadlines: you could die unexpectedly and that’s the end of your grace period, or Jesus could come suddenly and rapture the church. At that point, your grace period runs out. Like the old country preacher said, “You are either going to meet the undertaker, or the upper-taker, but either way, you’d better be ready to meet God!”

If you are not a Christian, God is giving you an extension to your grace period. He allowed you wake up today. Right now, He can promise you forgiveness and eternal life but He doesn’t

promise you another chance tomorrow. You may not live until tomorrow—or Jesus could return at any moment. People sometimes say, “It’s never too late.” When it comes to accepting God’s grace, it can be too late.

You are like the fig tree. God is showing you His grace and patience by giving you another chance to become fruitful in Christ. The Bible says in 2 Peter 3:9-10: “God isn’t late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining Himself on account of you, holding back the End because He doesn’t want anyone lost. He’s giving everyone space and time to change. But when the Day of God’s Judgment does come, it will be unannounced, like a thief.” (*The Message*)

The most important question you’ll ever ask is *not* “Why do good people suffer?” The most important question is “Am I ready to meet God?” Or “Where will I spend eternity?”

CONCLUSION

After the 9/11 attack, President Bush declared the following Friday to be a Day of National Prayer and Remembrance and a service was held at the National Cathedral in Washington—and Billy Graham was the main speaker. I commend the planners of that service on their selection, but there are some things about that service that disturb me. If you recall last week, I spoke about a subtle movement in America to recognize “God” but to deny Jesus is God, because it’s too intolerant and it’s not politically correct. In that September 14 service, they sang the wonderful hymn “A Mighty Fortress is our God.” Did you know they omitted the second verse? Now we are always singing hymns and leaving out verses, but the second verse of this great hymn was omitted because it’s the only verse that talks about Jesus—and that’s not politically correct. The second line of the second stanza says: “Were not the right man on our side, the Man of God’s own choosing; dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he! Lord Sabaoth (“ruler over all”), His name, from age to age the same, and He must win the battle!”

In His wonderful message, Dr. Graham spoke of the mystery of suffering. He said, “I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction. I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign, and He’s a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst of suffering.” If you were listening on radio, you missed his next statements. PBS was running the radio broadcast, which had a tape delay of several seconds. When complaints were made for omitting this next section, the reason given was that they had to change tapes. They had a manuscript of Dr. Graham’s message, could it be the following statement was omitted for the same reason the second verse of the hymn was left out—it’s not politically correct? Dr. Graham said next, “For the Christian, the Cross tells us that God understands our sin and suffering, for He took upon Himself in the person of Jesus Christ our sins and our suffering. And from the cross, God declares, ‘I love you. I know the heartaches and the sorrows and the pains that you feel. But I love you.’ The story does not end with the Cross, for Easter points us beyond the tragedy of the Cross to the empty tomb. It tells us that there is hope for eternal life, for Christ conquered evil and death, and hell. Yes, there is hope.”

I regret PBS didn't broadcast that portion of his message, for whatever reason. Because the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what America needs to hear today! For without the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, suffering has no meaning; it becomes a hopeless encounter with pain. But because Jesus suffered and died and rose victorious over the grave—we have hope! These are difficult days, my hope is not in our military, my security is not in our Homeland Security Agency, my hope and my security is in Jesus alone. And even though it is not politically correct we can stand and proclaim: Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives, all fear is gone. Because I know he holds the future and life is worth the living just because he lives!

OUTLINE

I. SUFFERING IS A PART OF A FALLEN WORLD

1. Moral evil (wicked people)

"the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand this?" *Jeremiah 17:9*

Jesus said, "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery ..." *Mark 7:21*

2. Natural evil (accidents and disasters)

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." *Romans 8:2*

II. SUFFERING IS UNRELATED TO GOODNESS

"Why do you call me GOOD? Jesus answered. "No one is GOOD—except God alone." *Luke 18:19*

"We share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us." *Romans 8:17-18*

III. SUFFERING AMPLIFIES GOD'S MESSAGE: "REPENT OR PERISH!"

"We should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone - an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but NOW He commands ALL men EVERYWHERE to REPENT. For He has set a day when He will judge the world by the man He has appointed. He has given PROOF of this to all men by raising Him from the dead." *Acts 17:29-31*

IV. GOD IS EXTENDING YOUR GRACE PERIOD ANOTHER DAY!

"God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining Himself on account of you, holding back the End because He doesn't want anyone lost. He's giving everyone space and time to change. But when the Day of God's Judgment does come, it will be unannounced, like a thief." *2 Peter 3:9-10 (The Message)*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes