

SERIES: Hard Questions for Thoughtful Christians and Inquiring Skeptics

SERMON: **Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People (and Good Things to Bad People)?**

SCRIPTURE: Luke 13:1-5

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One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Isaiah 1:18: “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.’” This week, and in fact this whole summer, I want us to reason together, to have a dialogue about some of the hard questions that confront thoughtful Christians. I’m hopeful also that there are also some unbelieving skeptics here this morning, because I believe Christianity is eminently reasonable if we will examine the data and give God a chance to respond to our questions.

The first message in this new series on Hard Questions deals with one of the most troubling issues in life, namely the problem of evil. Theologians call it theodicy, which comes from two Greek words for “the justice of God.” The question theodicy wrestles with is, “Is God fair?” The terrorist attacks on our country ten years ago in OK City and five years ago in New York City, and the devastation of the tsunami and Katrina brought the problem of evil and suffering out of the ivory tower of philosophy and theology and to the forefront of every thinking person’s mind. A few days after 911 Chuck Colson wrote in his daily commentary on current events: *This weekend I received a call from a Christian friend who was deeply troubled. The husband of a woman to whom she had been witnessing had been killed in the World Trade Center attack. The woman called my friend and demanded bitterly: “Where was your God that you’ve been telling me about this week?” Everywhere, people are raising the same question: How could a good God have allowed such massive evil? No question poses a greater stumbling block to Christian faith; no question is more difficult for Christians to answer.ⁱ*

I want to address this issue today for two reasons: First, to help each of us when we face unexplainable evil in our lives to think biblically and reasonably instead of just emotionally, and second, I also want to help you respond to your friends and neighbors and co-workers when they ask these same questions. First Peter 3:15 tells us we should “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone for the hope that we have.” If we can give people an answer for the problem of evil, we may perhaps earn a hearing for an even more important question, “How can I get right with God?” So I begin this morning with this proposition:

The problem of evil demands a response from every thinking person.

The classic formulation of the problem of evil is to claim that only two of the following three propositions can be true:

1. **God is good.**
2. **God is sovereign (all powerful).**
3. **Evil exists.**

In other words, perhaps God is good and *wants* to prevent evil and can’t—in which case He is not

sovereign; or He is sovereign but doesn't *want* to prevent evil—in which case He is not good; or maybe He both *wants* to prevent evil and *is able* to do so, but in that case there should be no evil.

Frankly, friends, the dilemma represented by these three propositions is a stumbling block to millions of people, no doubt even some in this room, though they may never have formulated the problem quite this way. They want to believe in a good, sovereign God, but when they see the level of evil we witnessed on 9/11 or in the contract murder of a little 14 year-old girl 9 months pregnant in our city a month ago, they don't know how it's possible. The facts just don't seem to add up.

One solution to the dilemma is to give up on one of the three propositions. The deists of early America were convinced of the goodness of God, and the presence of evil seemed to them beyond question, so they surrendered God's sovereignty. They viewed Him as one who created the world, wound it up like a clock, and then abandoned it to run on its own. Thus the evil they encountered was the result of God being detached or busy elsewhere. The liberal church of the past century has largely followed suit in elevating God's goodness at the expense of his sovereignty.ⁱⁱ The bottom line seems to be that we should give God a break; He's doing the best He can under difficult circumstances.

Others have surrendered God's goodness; in fact, they have given up completely on the God of the Bible in the face of the rampant evil and human suffering around us. Those who espouse an evolutionary, mechanistic philosophy of human origins tell us that evil is what we must expect as natural selection and the survival of the fittest work their wonders in the development of the human race. The strong survive; the weak perish; chaos often reigns. Deal with it!

There are even those who challenge the third proposition, namely the existence of evil. The religion known as Christian Science, as well as Unity School of Christianity, are two cults that have opted for this position. And in a sense the whole postmodern mind set is in danger of moving in this direction. Right and wrong, good and evil, are relative terms that depend upon one's cultural context. There are no absolute standards to guide us. In a recent poll a large percentage of college students refused to label even the Holocaust a moral evil.

Now these are interesting attempts to resolve the dilemma of theodicy, but none of them works for a biblical Christian. Why?

The Bible clearly affirms that all three of the propositions are true at the same time. God is good; God is sovereign; and there is evil. Now if I thought there was any serious doubt about God's character in this congregation, I would stop now and cite a multitude of Scripture passages to prove His goodness and His sovereignty, like Psalm 37, 91, 118, 121, Isaiah 40, Romans 8 & 9, and Ephesians 1. But I am confident that is not where the problem lies for most of us. Our struggle is with evil—not whether it exists—but how it can be so rampant when there *is* a sovereign, good God in control. Let's start with the following proposition:

The fact of evil is undeniable and can reach stunning proportions.

The origin of evil, according to the Bible, can be traced to the angelic world. The archangel Lucifer, one of the highest of God's created beings, rebelled against Him and was joined by up to one third of the holy angels, who fell from heaven in a cataclysmic, prehistoric event. Evil from the angelic world, in turn, infected both the physical earth and the human race, as Adam and Eve were enticed by Lucifer (known also as Satan or the Devil) to violate God's revealed will for them.

The results were stunning and far-reaching. Not only were Adam and Eve's spiritual lives impacted negatively by their sin; so were their bodies, their minds, their emotions, their work, their environment, their marriage, and their progeny. Their oldest son actually killed his brother, and things went down hill from there. We call this the Fall of Man.

The Fall of Man. The Scriptures make clear to us that when God originally completed His creative work, He said, "It is good." In fact, He said it was *very good*. But with the Fall came the capacity for human beings to be *very evil* as well. The Apostle Paul describes "man without God" in Romans 3, and the picture is not pretty:

"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit."

"The poison of vipers is on their lips."

"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

"Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know."

"There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:13-18)

Even if you accept this as a perfectly valid description of the suicide terrorists who struck our nation on 9/11, you probably have a difficult time with the verses that immediately precede that description: "As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10-12).

You see, there is an unspoken presupposition behind the question posed in our sermon title this morning: "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?", and that presupposition is that there *are* good people. The Bible says "Not." But immediately our defenses go up. We may have our little peccadilloes, and we may admit to having made our share of mistakes. But there's no way we should be put in the same category as terrorists or child abusers!

Let me be very careful at this point. It is true that there is probably no one in this room who has even conceived of the monstrous evil of a Jeffrey Dahmer or an Idi Amin or a Dennis Rader or a Muhammed Attah. There *is* a qualitative and quantitative difference between sinners. (And, therefore, you can be sure there are going to be qualitative and quantitative differences in the punishment sinners receive from the hand of almighty God). But the Bible says there actually *is* a sense in which we are all in the same general category as these evil people I have mentioned.

We all share in the Fall; we all possess a basic sin nature, and left to our own devices we will drift toward evil—it's only a matter of degree and opportunity.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Enlightenment, followed by 20th century optimism, humanism, and relativism, reacted to this biblical analysis of human nature by claiming that man is basically good, and it's only his environment that needs to be altered to bring out the very best in him. It's a problem of nurture, not nature. But I think in our heart of hearts we know that is not true. After all, probably none of us here this morning was born in a refugee camp, few in the ghetto, and no one in slavery. Most of us have had every advantage possible, and yet we know the wickedness in our own hearts.

Sure, none of us would go on a suicide mission, but we hate and lie and steal and covet and commit adultery in our hearts. The picture of the human race apart from God is not a pretty one.

Now one of the results of the Fall is pain and suffering.

Pain and suffering. First, we need to acknowledge that not all pain and suffering is evil in the sense of being morally reprehensible. Some is downright beneficial, as when one touches a hot stove—if you didn't feel instant pain, you wouldn't pull your hand away so fast and you would end up with worse injuries than a blister. Some pain and suffering is the result of what we call natural causes, as when an earthquake causes a tsunami. And some is caused by neglect, as when dikes fail and allow a city to flood. Nevertheless, whatever the particular cause, there is a level of human pain and suffering that seems pointless, and this is the kind that troubles us most.

C. S. Lewis writes,

We are perplexed to see misfortune falling upon decent, inoffensive, worthy people—on capable, hard-working mothers of families or diligent, thrifty little trades-people, on those who have worked so hard, and so honestly, for their modest stock of happiness and now seem to be entering on the enjoyment of it with the fullest right.^{iv}

I know what he's talking about, and so do you. We have all seen kind, decent people go through a whole series of tragic events in their lives that would stretch the perseverance of the hardest believer. I think of Bill Meddings, a wonderful godly man who attended First Free in St. Louis with his wife and two sons nearly 20 years ago. He lost his job while his 12-year-old son was struggling with cancer. After Timmy died, the family moved to California, where Bill lost his job again. Then his wife Sherry died of cancer. Or I think of John Bahnak, another member of our St. Louis church. John lost his voice box to cancer, he lost his job, their house burned to the ground, and their teenage son died in the same fire.^v It's OK to ask the question, "Why?", when faced with perplexing situations like this.

But what is even more difficult to grapple with is another whole kind of pain and suffering—that which is due, not to natural disaster, or human neglect, or mere misfortune, but to human wickedness.

Human wickedness. The capacity of human beings to inflict evil on one another is astounding. From the cruel taunts of a Middle School bully to the massive extermination of 40 million

people by Joseph Stalin, there is an incredible evil lurking in some human souls that cries out for answers. Why is it there, and why does God allow it to continue? The simple answer lies in both our greatest blessing and our worst curse: our capacity to make choices. God designed us with the ability to choose either good or evil. This is one asset that sets us apart from animals, but it is also the source of a great deal of the pain in our world. People (and that includes all of us) often make selfish, self-centered, and evil choices, for the power to choose necessarily includes within it the power to choose wrongly. Whenever that happens, other people get hurt.

God could prevent evil by simply removing our ability to choose it, but then we'd no longer be free moral agents; we would be robots. And although the power to choose is a profound truth that goes to the core of our humanity, an even more profound truth is that a sovereign, all-powerful, all-knowing God has chosen to respect and honor our ability to choose. He wants to be loved and obeyed voluntarily. Love is not genuine if there is no other option.^{vi}

However, simply saying that evil is an inevitable result of free will is not enough. The wickedness we see in our world—from the Holocaust to Pol Pot's Reign of Terror in Cambodia to the Hutu massacre to the destruction of the World Trade Center and the death of over 3000 Americans—demands examination. Thinking people can't just observe it and ignore it. Yet we soon discover that . . .

The interpretation of specific evil acts is complicated and risky.

Jesus himself was asked why bad things happen to some people. In Luke 13, He was asked about a bloody massacre carried out by Pontius Pilate, the same Roman ruler who would condemn *Him* to death a short time later. Let me read that account from Luke 13:1-5:
Now there were some present at that 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."

Notice that Jesus uses one example of suffering caused by human wickedness and another caused by natural disaster. In both cases His point seems to be this:

Causal relationships between sin and suffering are often impossible to establish. Pilate wiped out a bunch of Galileans while they were worshiping at the altar. How are they to understand this event? Jesus says, "Don't think it proves that these people were worse sinners than anyone else. And by the way, unless you repent, you too will all perish." Now wait a minute. That doesn't seem like any kind of a satisfying answer—He just throws it back in their lap! And then He reinforces His point by referring to a natural disaster. A tower in a nearby city had fallen suddenly and unexplainably, and eighteen people were crushed to death. And again Jesus responds almost identically.

This is one of the hard sayings of Jesus, but there's profound truth in it. While we cannot help but *seek* answers as to why tragedies strike, it is risky to tie such events to specific sins. Oh, sometimes the OT connects a specific judgment of God to a specific sin or period of rebellion by God's people. And in the NT we have occasional similar incidents, as when Ananias and Sapphira lose their lives as a direct result of their lying hypocrisy. But for the most part, it is dangerous for us to say, "This happened *after* that; therefore, this *was caused* by that."

Some of you may remember Jerry Falwell's response to 911 immediately after the attack. Falwell intimated on the 700 club that God was judging America through the WTC attack, and he cited abortion, the homosexual agenda, and even feminism as evidence that our country had asked for it. This was probably not a wise thing to say publicly while people were still in shock over the events (and in fact, he apologized the next day), but setting aside for the moment the political naivete it reveals, I have a problem with what he said *even* from a biblical standpoint.

We desperately want to establish causal connections between A and B. We are obsessed with categorizing things and explaining them. We also want to be able to lay blame, because that helps us get a handle on things. But Jesus tells us such judgments are not ours to make. Why? I think it's because we don't have the wisdom and knowledge to do that very well. Events can be terribly complex, and our feeble efforts to explain them often result in oversimplifying the obvious and ignoring underlying causes.^{vii}

Sin, of course, is the ultimate cause of every tragedy, and the consequences of sin are a kind of built-in judgment from God, but it is impossible for us to say with any sense of assurance that abortion is the reason God allowed the bombing of the World Trade Center. It could be, but we can't say for sure.

Instead of seeking external answers, we should focus on internal response, namely personal and corporate repentance. Any tragedy is a call for each of us to repent of sin in our own life. Remember the words of the apostle Peter: "It is time for judgment to begin with the family of God" (1 Peter 4:17). The sins of Christians and of the church are our first order of business. Our greed, materialism, pride, prayerlessness, disunity, gossip, self-protection, and lack of love are as much a cause for judgment as anyone else's behavior. And that seems to be Jesus' point in Luke 13. Every victim of a tragedy is an unwitting evangelist reminding us that repentance is our most important response.

The term "repentance" means to change our minds and head the other direction. We must reorient our minds about our sinfulness before a holy God. It doesn't matter how my sins stack up against those of a Jeffrey Dahmer, or a drug dealer, or a mafia hitman, or even Osama bin Laden. What matters is that judgment is coming and, as a sinner, I owe a debt to God and I have no ability to pay it. This is the "bad news" part of the Gospel.

But repentance also involves reorienting our thinking about Jesus. We need to quit thinking of Him simply as a nice extra on the set of life or a loving friend who is there when we need Him, but rather as the Lord of the universe and the only One who is capable of paying our debt to God. As our Savior, He died that we might live. This is the "good news" of the Gospel—Jesus

paid it all!

One of the greatest values of pain and suffering, whether that brought on by natural disaster or by human wickedness, I believe, is that it is the chief means God uses to get our attention so that we may be brought to repentance and receive His gift of salvation.

Pain and suffering can actually be God’s instrument of salvation. C. S. Lewis once wrote, “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.”^{viii} Later he added, “No doubt Pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the *only opportunity* the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.”

But pain and suffering can be beneficial not only to an unbeliever but also to a believer.

Pain and suffering can also be productive in the *believer’s* life. Last year as we were working our way through 2 Corinthians, I noted that there are at least five reasons why God allows suffering in a believer’s life.

1. To discipline us for disobedience
2. To test the validity of our faith
3. To prepare our hearts for heaven
4. To reveal to us what we really love
5. To strengthen us for greater usefulness

We don’t have time this morning to re-preach that message, but I want to remind you of it so that perhaps you can go back and review. My point is simply that pain and suffering can be redemptive for both unbeliever and believer.

And what about the “evil” of good things happening to bad people?

This is the other side of our dilemma today, and this troubles us too. Why do people like Donald Trump and Ted Turner prosper so well in the business world, when they seem to have no regard for God or His principles? Why do politicians whose only absolute values seem to be power and wealth get re-elected year after year? Why does the student who cheats his way through school get the academic scholarship that your child was denied? I don’t have time to examine this thoroughly as a separate issue this morning, but allow me to simply add one phrase to the proposition we all know is true: “Good things do happen to bad people *for a while*.” If I were God I wouldn’t let bad people enjoy good things at all. But I’m not God and we should all be glad about that. There is an aspect of God’s grace that is clearly taught in the Bible but sometimes ignored. It is called Common Grace.

Common grace differs from the grace we usually talk about (His grace in salvation) in that it is showered, literally, on everyone, as in, “He makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust” (See NIV). Theologians distinguish these two kinds of grace this way: “God is good to *all* in some

ways and He is good to *some* in all ways.” The fact is, God loves His whole creation. He is not willing that any should perish. He wishes all to be saved. And one of the means He uses to draw evil people to Himself is to pour out His common grace. He enables them to enjoy intelligence and wealth and nature and relationships and lots of other things. But sadly, the wicked often take those things from God’s hand and then turn around and curse Him.

But not for good! The 73rd Psalm is the classic biblical passage on the prosperity of the wicked. The Psalmist describes them in a somewhat exaggerated way, which is how we often view them:

*“They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued
by human ills. . . .
This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in
wealth.”*

But then he gives us the punch line in verse 16: “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood *their final destiny*.” That destiny is then stated specifically a few verse later: “Those who are far from you will perish.” Those who refuse the provision God has made for their sin and continue to go their own way may prosper for a while, but their final destiny will be tragic.

There is much more that could be said this morning about why bad things happen to good people (and good things to bad people). But I certainly would be remiss if I did not tell you that . . .

The ultimate answer to evil is the Cross.

Now isn’t that ironic? The single most evil, heinous act ever committed—the death by torture of the only truly innocent person who ever lived—is the ultimate answer to evil? Yes! John Stott, in his great book, *The Cross of Christ*, writes,

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. . . . In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away.

And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering.^{ix}

I close this morning with a short playlet entitled “The Long Silence.” I think it says it all:

At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly — not with cringing shame, but with belligerence.

“Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?” snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. “We endured terror . . . beatings . . . torture . . . death!”

In another group a Negro boy lowered his collar. “What about this?” he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. “Lynched . . . for no crime but being black!”

In another crowd, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. “Why should I suffer” she murmured, “It wasn't my fault.”

Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in his world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a Negro, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the centre of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth—as a man!

“Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.

At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die a horrible death. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.”

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence.^x

“Come let us reason together,” says the God of the universe. The problem of evil is hard to understand, but there is one thing I can state for certain. Each of us has the opportunity this morning to take an inward look at our own evil and repent. If you wait until the Judgment, you will have to pay your debt yourself. But God is willing to settle out of court. He loves you and offers to forgive your debt to Him. No terrorist, no evil person, not even Satan himself, can cancel this divine deal. All that remains is for you to sign on the dotted line, i.e. to accept His Son as your Savior, and then, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

i. Charles Colson, *Breakpoint Commentary* #010918, September 18, 2001, “Where Was God?: Reflections on God’s Goodness and Terrorism.”

ii. And sadly, even some professed evangelicals have recently abandoned the traditional view of God as a sovereign, all-powerful, omniscient God. They tell us that God cannot know the choices of free moral agents in advance; thus evil is to a certain extent outside His control. The view is known as the Openness of God, and it has created a huge rift in our sister denomination, The Baptist General Conference.

iii. The theological term used for this is Total Depravity. It essentially means that no man without God has the capacity to please Him and, in fact, each of us has an immense capacity to rebel against God and to destroy our own environment, other people, and even ourselves. When theologians call mankind without God “totally depraved,” they do not mean that every individual is as bad as he could be, or that anyone is incapable of doing some things that are nice and noble as judged on the human level. Rather they mean that no one has the capacity to merit any favor with God or do anything that will earn a right standing with Him.

iv. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 96.

v. The best I can do to explain this degree of pain and suffering from natural causes (which ultimately will be understood only in eternity) is probably to quote C. S. Lewis when he says, “Let me implore the reader to try to believe, if only for the moment, that God, who made these deserving people, may really be right when He thinks that their modest prosperity and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them blessed; that all this must fall from them in the end, and that if they have not learned to know Him they will be wretched. And therefore He troubles them. . . .” (*The Problem of Pain*, 97). Interestingly, John Bahnak did not give his heart to God until after the terrible events I mentioned.

vi. Some of the thoughts in this paragraph are borrowed from Rick Warren, Pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, CA., who wrote a letter after 911 to his congregation entitled, “Why Does God Allow Evil?”

vii. In John 9 Jesus’ disciples thought they were being very astute in asking Jesus regarding a man born blind, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Do you

remember Jesus' answer, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." I don't think Jesus really meant that neither the man nor his parents sinned; actually both sinned, "for *all* have sinned." What He meant is that no *particular* sin by either party was the immediate and direct cause of this tragedy.

viii. Lewis, 93.

ix. John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 335, 336.

x. Stott, 336, 337.

<http://www.fefcwichita.org/sermons2006/070906ma/playlist.m3u>