

What on earth is God doing?

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[0 : 0 0] So as Mark said, it's Luke chapter 12, starting at verse 54, and that's on page 1051. He also said to the crowds, when you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, a shower is coming, and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, there will be scorching heat, and it happens. You hypocrites, you know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny. There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Or those 18 on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Let me add my welcome to you. My name is Simon Dowdy and I'm the Minister of Grace Church and it's very good to have you with us this morning as we look at this tricky, difficult question, what on earth is God doing in his world? Now we just had the Bible read and I'm going to be focusing this morning on that reading from the Bible, so do please keep the Bible open at Luke chapters 12 and 13, page 1051. And I'm going to pray for us and ask for God's help as we seek to answer this question this morning from his word, the Bible. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much that as we've thought already this morning, we do live in a world which you have created. And we thank you too that you are a speaking God, that as we come to the Bible like this, we are hearing you, your voice, you speaking to us.

And we pray therefore this morning, please would you help us to grasp more of the nature of the world in which we live and the way in which we might rightly respond to that. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Now just to reiterate as well, we are going to have a written question time afterwards, so if you do have questions during the talk, just write them down and we'll collect the question sheets at the end. What on earth is God doing in his world? I guess it's a question, isn't it, people often ask, but I sense that it is a question which people have asked in particular over the last six months or so. So the earthquake that devastated the city of Christchurch in New Zealand. A few weeks later, an earthquake 8,000 times more powerful, it's hard to imagine, isn't it, in Japan and the tsunami and the nuclear accidents that followed. The Jasmine Revolution sweeping across the Middle East. And all of this happening in the context of economic turmoil in many countries and economic crisis in ours. Not to mention of course the personal earthquakes which some of us will have suffered in the last six months or so. So a friend of mine has just had major cancer and major surgery for cancer at the age of 36. What on earth is God doing?

[4 : 22] John Humphreys, the presenter of Radio 4's Today programme, puts the question like this in his book In God We Doubt. Those who listen to the Today programme will know that he is not a man who pulls his punches. And it's interesting that he has no time for the kind of angry atheists who he believes very strongly simply overstate their points. But nor does he have any time for Christians.

Who he says, you know, he looks at the Christian insistence that God is loving and powerful. And this is what he writes in his book. You're telling me that God is like that.

But this is the world he created. You must be joking. For some I guess it's an intellectual question, isn't it? You know, why does God allow these kinds of things to happen? For others of course, it is a much more personal question and much more painful.

For many, it is the decisive evidence against God. So after the Indonesian tsunami a few years ago, Melanie Phillips wrote, how can you believe in a God who allows suffering on such a scale?

And I guess many of us will think exactly the same as she does. But of course, the very fact that we ask the question, what on earth is God doing, perhaps shows that for some of us, at least, belief in God is closer than we might imagine. Because the question assumes, doesn't it, that God is powerful. The question assumes that God assumes that God is loving, that he is good. If we actually really believe that we just kind of live in a totally random universe where there is no God, then we wouldn't ask the question, why shouldn't the world be as it is if there is no God? Now, strikingly, when Jesus was faced himself with human suffering and tragedy, he addressed it head on.

[6 : 40] Suffering and human tragedy and disaster is not the kind of elephant in the room, so to speak, that Jesus was keen to avoid. Now, rather, he took the opportunity, and we're going to see this in this reading in Mark 12 and 13 this morning, he took the opportunity to urge his listeners to consider where they stood with God, and whether they would be ready if a similar thing were to happen to them.

So, we're going to look at Luke 12 and 13 this morning. You'll find I've put an outline. Some people like talk outlines, some don't, but I put a talk outline on the back of the service sheet. Do follow that if that's helpful. And two key things that Jesus says to us, I think, which help us to unlock the answer to this question, what on earth is God doing? First of all, don't take it personally.

Secondly, do heed the warning. First of all, don't take it personally. Let me read chapter 13 of Luke, verses 1 to 4 again. There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those 18 on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

Now, two events, it seems, were on the minds of Jesus' listeners. Both had involved terrible suffering. The first is, as we can see, a man-made massacre. The Roman governor Pilate was known for taking a hard line against political disturbances. It seems that he had allowed his troops to go on the rampage, killing Galilean Jewish people when they had been about to perform a religious duty.

They were not immoral people. They were religious people. Why does God allow such things? What is God doing? The second was the collapse of a tower, killing 18 people, perhaps an industrial accident, something like that. Again, why does God allow that? Well, the Bible is very clear that God is in control of his world, that God is not the author of evil. So why then does he allow it? Well, will you notice that Jesus doesn't sort of hold up his hands in moral outrage and simply say, this is terrible, this kind of thing should not happen? Isn't that interesting? Which suggests, of course, that, as we'll see in a while, there is an explanation for it. Nor does Jesus just kind of turn a blind eye and assume that these kinds of things shouldn't happen, or that they don't happen.

[9 : 44] And then I guess it's the temptation for many of us, isn't it, in 21st century Britain, as we kind of banish suffering and death from everyday life, as we package people off into hospices and old people's homes and that kind of thing, mentioned death at a dinner party, and I guess you're unlikely to be invited back. Now, instead, Jesus warns us against drawing the wrong conclusion.

Did you see that in verse 2? Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No. And he says exactly the same thing, doesn't he, in verse 4? Or those 18 on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them? Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No. You see, there are wrong answers to this question of what on earth is God doing? Why is there suffering in our world? In fact, in the Old Testament, the book of Job devotes 42 chapters to the question of suffering and why it happens, and two-thirds of the book is full of wrong answers. There are wrong answers in the face of suffering. And certainly in the culture of the first century, the assumption by many would have been that for people to suffer in this particular way, as they had done, they must have deserved it in some way. Either because of something they had done or something in their kind of family had done, that they got what was due to them. They had it coming to them for some reason. Now, I guess we don't come across that too much, do we, in our culture?

Because so much of the way in which we think has been shaped by the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of the Bible. But I remember very clearly a few years ago when we were living in the East End, a Muslim family who are neighbours of ours who just live three doors next to us, were going through the most terrible time, which culminated tragically in the death of their son. Now, their assumption was, with their backgrounds, that Allah was particularly angry with them, that they were suffering specifically because of something which they or their extended family had done. Think of a friend who works in Thailand with its predominantly Buddhist culture. And she says that on the whole, it is a society which is lacking in compassion for the sick or the poor or the marginalised. Now, why is that? Well, because in Buddhist culture, you get the kind of life that you deserve. So, notice that Jesus insists that there is no evidence whatsoever that those who suffer in this world are worse than any others.

You cannot point the finger and say, well, of course, that is why they are suffering. They had it coming to them. In other words, you and I are not to draw the wrong conclusions about what God is doing in his world. It's not that the Japanese or New Zealanders are worse than any others. And it's the same too at the level of personal suffering. You know, we're not to draw the wrong conclusion when someone finds they are suffering terribly, inexplicably. We're not to draw the wrong conclusion when people face hardship and suffering. It's not that God has it in for them. Don't take it personally.

But secondly, Jesus is very clear, do heed the warning. Don't take it personally, but do heed the warning.

[13 : 51] Now, in the year 1755, 30,000 people died in an earthquake in Lisbon. And the French philosopher Voltaire asked the question, why does God allow such suffering if he is good?

Why does God allow such suffering if he is good? And he concluded there could only be two possibilities. Either that God is good, but not powerful, and therefore he is unable to prevent terrible suffering. Or he is powerful, but not good, and therefore unwilling to prevent terrible suffering. He argued that if a good and powerful God exists, he would not allow pointless suffering and evil. And I guess like Voltaire, we can perhaps be quick to assume that suffering in our world is pointless. But of course, there's a major flaw in that. It does make the assumption that if evil appears to be pointless to me, if suffering appears to be pointless to me, then it is indeed pointless. But of course, the fact is that just because I can't see or imagine a good reason why

God might allow something to happen, it doesn't mean there can't be one. Now, I guess many of us can relate to this, can't we, at a whole range of levels. So, you know, those of us who have suffered to some degree, I guess often we kind of look back over that over time, and we may well be grateful in part for it. Perhaps for what we learned about ourselves, or for the way in which we felt it developed our character. Not grateful for the suffering itself, but grateful for something of what came out of it. Now, in fact, from God's vantage point, there is good reason for all suffering, because suffering comes with a warning. Let me read again verses 2 to 5 and see if you can spot it. Jesus answered them, do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Or those 18 on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Now, we said that you can't draw a direct link between the suffering of the individual and what they have done. But notice here that Jesus does not assume that those who suffered under Pilate or those who were killed when that tower collapsed, he does not assume that they didn't deserve their fate. Isn't that very striking? Here is Jesus Christ, the most loving, compassionate man to have walked this earth. And Jesus assumes they did deserve their fate, but, and I guess this is the really important point, no more so than anyone else, because it is what all deserve.

Now, that's a big thing to say, isn't it? So, in order to grasp why that is, notice these next three subheadings on the outline. First of all, that suffering is the result of man's rebellion against God. Suffering in our world is the result of mankind's rebellion against God. Because when God created the world, he created the good world. He created a perfect world. As we read the Genesis account of creation, as God steps back from having created his world, what does he say about it?

[18:07] It is good. At every stage of creation, we are told it is good. It is good. It is good. That is the refrain of creation. But tragically, it wasn't long before mankind had rebelled against God, rejected God, deciding that they would take the crown instead of God, so to speak.

And live as God in God's place. And push God to the margin of their lives. Now, that is what the Bible calls sin. It is the attitude which says, I will not have God to be God over me. I will run my life my way as best I see fit.

And much of the suffering we see in the world is a result of that. It is a result of sin. The abuse of ourselves, the abuse of others, pride, selfishness, greed, prejudice, divorce, violence, war, and so on.

Or the abuse of our environment. Pollution, environmental destruction. You see, we live in a world, don't we? And we look at our world. We look at perhaps our own lives, some of us.

We look at the newspapers. We look at the newspapers. We watch the news. And we cry out, there's something wrong. And there is. But of course, what is wrong is much closer to home than we might like to imagine. It is our sin.

[19:46] The consequence of putting ourselves in the driving seat rather than God. And God, in turn, gives us over to the consequences of our sin. He releases his restraining hand from us.

Which means that the consequences of our rebellion against God are seen throughout our lives and throughout the world in which we live. Indeed, the Bible tells us that our rebellion against God is so seismic that actually the whole of creation has been dislocated and put out of joint as a result.

That even natural disasters are in some way a result of human rejection of God. And therefore, it's not surprising that Jesus says that wars, famines, earthquakes, these kinds of natural disasters will be a feature of life throughout history until he comes at the end of time.

You'll see on the outline, if you just take it up there, I put some verses from Mark chapter 13. When Jesus says precisely this thing, Mark chapter 13, verses 7 and 8.

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places and famines.

[21 : 15] These are the beginning of birth pains. In other words, the world would always be like this. There will always be these kinds of natural disasters throughout history.

We live in a good world, because God created it to be good. But we also live in a world which has been dislocated and twisted by man's rejection of God and rebellion against God.

So you know, just think of something like water. Water is a brilliant thing. We need it to survive. We need it to irrigate crops and so on.

But water also has terrific power to destroy. Witness the floods in Queensland, northern Australia, a few months ago. Or the tectonic plates, whose movement causes earthquakes.

I discovered recently that they are essential for human survival. In the book Rare Earth by geologist Peter Ward and astronomer Donald Brownlee, they demonstrate that tectonic plates are essential for the survival of the earth and for the survival of human beings.

[22 : 28] They say that for the survival of continents. For maintaining a careful balance between mountains, earth and sea. That for acting as a global thermostat.

For ensuring the right level of elements in the environment. Tectonic plates are essential for all these things. Tectonic plates are essential for life. And they conclude in their book, it may be that tectonic plates are the central requirement for life on the planet.

That point is very simple. That if tectonic plates didn't move, the result would be mass extinction. We'd have to say, wouldn't we, tectonic plates are a good thing.

But of course when they do move, the results can also be devastating. We live in a good world. But a world that has been dislocated by a man's rebellion against God.

The reason for suffering is not because God is evil. Not because God is powerless. The second subheading there. Suffering is a warning of God's final judgment.

[23 : 39] And I wonder if you noticed in that reading how Jesus uses suffering as a warning. Have a look again at verse 3. No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Verse 5. No, I tell you, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Now the perishing that Jesus has in mind here is perishing on the judgment day.

He's been talking about that at the end of the previous chapter. Have a look back to verse 58. As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way.

Lest he drag you to the judge. And the judge hands you over to the officer. And the officer puts you in prison. In other words, if someone is taking you to court, you know, don't you, the sensible thing to do is to get an out-of-court settlement before it's too late.

If not, you run the risk of paying the full penalty. In the same way, Jesus says very clearly, doesn't he, here, that the judgment day is coming.

[24 : 40] And therefore now, now is the time to get things sorted out with God. So, you know, perhaps you imagine you're driving along a motorway in your car and a warning light appears on the dashboard.

And actually, you know full well, don't you, that it will be a total pain to have to take your car to a garage. You won't be without a car for a day or so to try and find out what's wrong with it and get the fault fixed. But you also know that if you ignore the warning light, the likelihood is that something far worse will happen, which will be far more expensive and far more inconvenient.

Well, similarly, says Jesus, the existence of suffering, it's a constant warning to us that there is something wrong in our world. If we do nothing about the warning, something far worse will happen.

You see, you and I, let me put it like this, we need a world which reminds us that all is not well. We need a world which simply in our daily existence, in the way which every day, tomorrow, Tuesday, we go about our lives, we need a world which reminds us, that all is not well and that God does care about sin.

You see, God's judgment on the final day will be so terrible that he puts us in a world that screams to us, there is something wrong. Life, the world is not as it is meant to be.

[26 : 24] And as such, of course, that is God's great kindness to us, isn't it? Wonderfully kind of God, that he puts us in that kind of world. Otherwise, you and I might simply breeze through life as if all is well and as if nothing is wrong.

In the middle of the Second World War, the Christian writer C.S. Lewis said this, War does something to death. It forces us to remember it.

War makes death real to us. And he goes on and he says, That would have been regarded as one of its blessings by most of the great Christians of the past. They thought it was good for us to be always aware of our mortality.

Well, why is that? Lewis goes on. It's then, he says, that we see unmistakably the sort of world in which we have been living. If we thought we were building heaven on earth, if we look for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned.

And not a moment too soon. What is he saying? Well, tragedy warns us against placing all our hopes and all our ambitions on this world.

[27 : 54] It helps us to see reality as it really is. A world terribly distorted by sin. A world facing God's judgment.

Which is why, thirdly and finally, suffering is a call to act now. Again, I wonder if you noticed how Jesus finishes by calling his hearers to take action.

Did you notice that? As twice he says, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. It's why Jesus urges us in verses, at the end of chapter 12, in verses 54 to 56, to read the times.

Let me read for us, chapter 12, verse 54. Jesus said to the crowds, when you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, a shower is coming, and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say there will be scorching heat, and it happens.

You hypocrites. You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present times? Why don't you understand the world you live in, says Jesus?

[29 : 05] You observe the weather. Those of us who are part of the Grace Church camping trip yesterday were observing the weather particularly keenly, and we took action as a result.

And those who are planning to spend the night up at Crystal Palace on the hill last night did not, because they observed the weather, and they decided to stay at home, despite the rather feeble excuses, I may say, from one or two.

Nonetheless, they took action, having seen the weather forecast. Putt, says Jesus, how we do that, but we fail to interpret the world around us.

Jesus calls us to urgent repentance. Repentance. Repentance simply means to turn around. It is to say to God, I've made a complete mess of my life.

Please will you forgive me? From now on, please will you be in charge of my life instead? Will you say, how do I know that God will listen?

[30 : 05] Well, because at this stage in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he knows he will endure the most unjust suffering of all.

Unlike us, Jesus was truly innocent. Jesus never sinned. He died the death we deserve. He bore the judgment of God that is rightly ours, so that those who do repent might be forgiven and stand before God on the final day, on the final judgment day, as forgiven people.

Indeed, Jesus died to bring his people to a new world, a new creation, where there will be no more suffering. It's very striking. The first two chapters of the Bible describe a perfect world, and the last two chapters of the Bible also describe a perfect world.

No more tears, no more death, no more pain, no more suffering. So often in the question, when we're faced with a disaster, we ask the question, what is God doing?

How can God allow that? What on earth is God doing in his world? But God has done something. Jesus has died. It's why Jesus can call us to repent, to get things sorted out with God, that we might be with him as forgiven people in the new creation.

[31 : 36] Now, if you've never done that, we'd love you to join us on our next Christianity Explore course. You'll see on this insert, where there's the place to fill in questions, there are also details of Christianity Explore, which is a six-week course.

We run it sort of three or four times a year. It's running churches up and down the country. It's a brilliant course, either as a kind of introductory course, the Christian faith, or as a refresher course, for those who kind of want to go over the basics again.

And we plan to run the course on Sunday mornings, but as you'll see, if you can't do Sunday mornings, then there's a box to tick for those who can't do Sunday mornings. That would be a really excellent course to sign up for.

And why not come and talk to me afterwards as well? I've got a little booklet here, which I'd love to give to you, called Mere Christian, if you want to think about things a little more. But it's very striking, isn't it, how Jesus turns the tables.

I don't know about you, but I think we're very quick to ask the question, what on earth is God doing? What are you doing, God, in your world? I think it's very striking, isn't it, here, how Jesus, the man of great compassion and love, how actually he turns the tables on his questioners, and he says, what are you going to do?

[32 : 53] Are you going to heed the warning that the world is shouting at you?