

Why Does God Allow Suffering: Insights from Jesus

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[0:00] Let us pray. Lord, may your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your son's greater glory.

! May it always be our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Would you sit please? It is so delightful for Brenda and me and our daughter Frances to be back with you at Holy Trinity, and wonderful for me to be here for the first time with your new wonderful rector, Father Caleb.

Father Caleb and his team are going to quietly hand out some Bibles to you. I always find the Bible is a lot better open than closed, and so this will give you an opportunity to open them as I share this morning.

How can you believe in a good God in 2016 when that God seems to allow so much suffering in the world?

And I think if we were all honest in one form or another, we will have asked ourselves or others will have asked us that question. That's a question that I get asked more than any other when I'm talking to unbelievers.

[1:21] How can a good God allow a child to suffer with cancer? Or an innocent person to be the victim of gang violence? Or how can a good God allow ISIS to terrorize and afflict such evil on the disciples of Christ in places like Libya and Syria?

Chapter 13 of St. Luke's Gospel deals with the theme of suffering. And there are three incidences in chapter 13 of Luke's Gospel which show us that suffering can come from one of three sources. Why is this important? It's important because when you endure or experience suffering and you discern the source of that suffering, only then can you make the appropriate and right response and take the appropriate action.

So in Luke chapter 13 we find three kinds of suffering. And if you would turn there in your Bibles today, I'd be grateful if you have an electronic version like mine. You can use that so long as you don't check your emails while I'm preaching.

Say yes, Bishop. And I'll never know, of course, unless you send me an email and I'm checking mine. I said that in one of our Cana churches just recently and someone sent a tweet message to me and it appeared on my screen.

[2:49] So I now turn my iPad into flight mode so I don't have such ability to have communication. Luke chapter 13, if you would turn there. The first cause of suffering from this passage is suffering caused by human factors.

The second cause of suffering is suffering caused by divine intervention or divine action. And the third is satanic. Suffering caused by the enemy of souls.

And in our gospel reading this morning we're going to deal primarily with the first two of those three sources but I'll touch on the third just to complete the teaching if we have time this morning.

So let's look at the appropriate action in each case. Firstly, suffering that is caused by human factors. And look in Luke chapter 13, in the first part of the chapter.

A human being called Pontius Pilate wanted to improve, in Jesus' day, the water supply to the city of Jerusalem. And he got an architect to design an aqueduct from about 10 miles south of Jerusalem, higher in the hills, to bring water to the city, the city on the hill.

[4:02] And you can see the remains of this aqueduct still there, just outside of the city of Jerusalem today, close to Bethlehem. Archways that were built, that still remain, built at the hand or the instruction of Pontius Pilate.

The trouble was, as often is the case in central government, there was no money to build his engineering feat. And the Roman Emperor wasn't going to give him any grants.

So where did he get them, this Pontius Pilate? He thought, well, now, the temple treasury looks like it's fairly wealthy and rich. I hear they've been getting jolly good connections lately, and there must be quite a lot of money stashed away there somewhere, so I'll just borrow that money.

After all, he thought, it was given to help the people themselves. It's for them. It's not for me, and so I'm sure it will be all right. And history tells us that Pontius Pilate took the money from the temple treasury, he helped himself, he built the aqueduct, and the Lord's people found out.

They found out that the money they had given for the Lord's work had in fact been used for another purpose. And they were incensed, rightly so.

[5 : 23] They were so angry that a mob gathered in the temple right there, and Pilate realized he had a dangerous situation on his hands. He sent into the mob Roman soldiers, dressed in civilian clothes, with cudgels, and at a given signal, they were to disperse the crowd.

Unfortunately, they went far further than the orders that were given, and instead of just dispersing the crowd, they bludgeoned to death hundreds of Galilean worshippers.

Pilate literally mingled the blood of those worshippers with the sacrifices that were being offered in worship to God.

And there were bodies everywhere, historians tell us, in the house of God. And with that background in Luke chapter 13, they came to Jesus, and they said, What about that disaster? Luke chapter 13. And why did they raise it? Because at the end of chapter 12, Jesus had been saying, Your sins will find you out.

[6 : 37] And he goes on, look in verse 1, and says, There were some people present at that very time. What time? The time when he had said, Your sins will find you out.

In chapter 12. Be sure that disaster will come. And they're saying, Well, Jesus, was this an example of the kind of thing you meant?

Was this God's judgment on these worshippers? Were they bad people? Did they deserve this terrible, terrible suffering at the hands of Pontius Pilate?

Was this catastrophe something they had merited by what they had done? Were they worse than other people? It's amazing how many people have this superstitious attitude to suffering, even today.

If a person suffers, let's be honest, we sometimes believe that they are innocent rather than guilty, and tend to say, Why should this happen to them?

[7 : 44] Is it not true that if a man who hasn't been known to live a wicked life dies a terrible death, we immediately say, He didn't deserve it. He didn't deserve it.

That such a person is only paying for the way he lived. Is that not true, on the other hand? Is it also not true that we tend to believe that a person who dies peacefully and quietly has gone to heaven? Don't we believe that? Is that not true? I've heard it said at so many funerals that when a person dies peacefully, their conscience is clear.

But as many of us know, sometimes nothing could be further from the truth. Think of Job in the Old Testament, if you would, sitting there, scraping his boils with broken pottery, sitting on an ash heap, having lost his children in a disaster, and his comforters, as we call them, came to him and said, Sort out your sins, brother Job.

Examine your heart. Repent of your sins. And yet Job knew that his suffering was not a result of his sinfulness. And in our Lord's day, they believed the same thing.

[8 : 58] They come to Jesus in Luke chapter 13, and they say, Jesus, you have just been saying that our sins will find us out. Disaster is certain to overtake us.

What about this disaster in the temple of Pontius Pilate? Was that an example of what you mean? Had those Galileans from the north, you know, they despised the people from the north, had those Galileans from the north been particularly bad people?

And was this punishment from God for what they had been doing? Let's look in verse 4 at our Lord's response. Look with me. Jesus not only answered that question, but he mentioned another case. Look, verse 4. He said, What then about the tower that fell down in the village of Siloam, which is just below Jerusalem, and killed 18 people?

You can go to that place today in Jerusalem. I don't think we went there on our Israel tour. You can go to this place. Do you suppose that those 18 people were being punished for something wrong they had done, says Jesus?

[10:09] Perhaps the equivalent, the collapse of a building in our day, which results in deaths of innocent people, a disaster of some kind, and people are killed. So here then is the question we ask.

And it's an important one. When tragedy or disaster comes, are we always to assume that those who suffer are being punished for their sins?

Does their suffering indicate they are getting what they deserve? Does that mean that they have suffered because they had sinned? And Jesus provides five insights for us in these few verses. He firstly says, the people who do suffer such disasters due to human factors are no worse than people who do.

Secondly, he says, the people who do not suffer such disasters, do you notice, are no better than the people who do. You see, there are many disasters in our world.

[11:17] Many things can go wrong. Train crashes, air crashes, massacres here, massacres there, mistakes that are made in building codes that bring buildings down, mistakes in other places.

And when this happens, it has nothing to do with the moral quality of those people who suffer.

Thirdly, Jesus says, every person, every human being deserves to have such tragedy.

Now, we don't like this. Here is an insight which is revolutionary, an idea which is alien to our minds because if we're honest, brothers and sisters, many of us still think that our good deeds will put us in a right place with God.

If we're honest, if we're truly honest, we say they were such good people, they did such good things, they served on the church vestry, why did they have to suffer in such a way?

Now, I hear that often. In other words, if we suffered such tragedy, it wouldn't be a case of what we've done to deserve it.

[12:27] All of us, brothers and sisters, have done enough to deserve such tragedy. We are all sinners. All of us. God sends, remember Matthew 5, the rain on the righteous and who else?

The unrighteous. The righteous and the unrighteous. This enormously changes a Christian's attitude to suffering if we believe it. A Christian, as Christians, we do not say, what have I designed to deserve this suffering?

For when ill health strikes us, the Christian says, I am just amazed by the grace of God that this suffering has not come earlier.

If disaster comes, surely the faithful disciple of Christ says, I just thank God that I've had so many years without such tragedy.

The simple fact is, all of us deserve such tragedy. It is not that we are innocent and deserve health and safety. It is that we are sinners and we deserve destruction.

[13:37] And as soon as we've been able to grasp this truth, our attitude to suffering undergoes a radical change. We become profoundly thankful that we have not yet suffered in the way others have.

I suggest that to you and encourage you to study the Scriptures in response. Fourthly, the fourth insight Jesus makes, it is right for us, it is right for all of us to prepare for suffering and to be ready. It was one of my heroes, Corrie ten Boone, who in the days of the Second World War, as many of you will know in her book, *The Hiding Place*, recalls so much suffering that she and her sister Betsy went through for sheltering the Jewish people in their Amsterdam home.

And then later in the camps, her sister died. After the Second World War, in her preaching, Corrie ten Boone would say, if there is one thing God the Holy Spirit is telling me to tell the people who listen to me preach, is prepare for suffering.

Prepare for suffering. So it's right for all of us to prepare and to be ready. It's not a chance matter whether tragedy will hit our life.

[14:51] Tragedy will come to every human life sooner or later. We need to realize this. And then the final insight in this passage that I want to share with you in this first point from Jesus.

Therefore, says Jesus, the only way, the only way to escape from such certain tragedy, do you notice verse 5? This is a verse that ought to be underlined in your Bible.

And even though these Bibles belong to the church, I give you as bishop permission to underline this verse. And if they defend you, you can talk to the rector afterwards. Such an important verse.

Verse 5. Unless you repent. Do you see? Unless you repent, said Jesus, you will all likewise perish. And he's speaking to the disciples. Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. In other words, Jesus says, when you read a headline, airliner crashes, buildings fall, your first reaction should be,

am I ready?

[15:54] Have I repented of my own sins? On this third Sunday in Lent, let us be clear that this word, repent, requires action.

Jesus did not say you will perish, Jesus did not say you will all perish likewise unless you believe. He did not say that. He said, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Unless the bishop repents, he will all likewise perish. Unless you repent, and repentance includes coming to a knowledge in your head of your own sin.

It means a sorrow in your heart for that sin. It means a confession of that sin. It means a turning from that sin. It means making restitution for that sin if it can be made.

Jesus said that this is the only way for you to escape from such disaster. Every disaster you read in the daily news or on the television screens means that is me.

[16:54] That is me. Unless I put things right with God. And so my reaction to suffering and tragedy should be this. Those poor people, their opportunity of repentance has been stopped and cut short.

My second reaction should be and one day mine will also be stopped. Am I ready? Have I repented of my sins? Jesus said when you read about other people's tragedies make it personal to yourself. And I'll show you where he said this. He uses a little word eight times in this gospel passage. Have you noticed it? It's another one you ought to underline. He uses the little word you eight times in just three verses.

You, you, you, you, you. Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners? I tell you. But unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

So Jesus makes the suffering of others an opportunity for our personal response and repentance.

Unless you repent unless I repent we will all likewise perish.

[18:10] So firstly suffering that is caused by human factors. Are you with me? Say yes bishop. Even if you're not you're now awake and you'll be with me for the second point.

Suffering that is caused by divine displeasure at the hand of God. At the hand of God. The Bible states very clearly that God does sometimes cause suffering.

Human beings cause some suffering. We've looked at that. And yet also so too does almighty God.

Our God is a God who prepares a place called hell in which people will suffer.

This can be very very frightening. And yet it's true. Why would God cause suffering? And that's a good question and I'm pleased you've asked it this morning. Why would God send disaster?

What of Sodom and Gomorrah two cities that were destroyed not at the hands of human beings but at the hand of God in Genesis chapter 19.

[19:13] And their remains lie buried somewhere beneath the southern end of the Dead Sea. And if you've been to Israel or been on one of our trips to the Holy Land and you stand on the top of Masada you can begin to see in your mind the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah beneath the southern end of the Dead Sea.

The only relic that's ever been found of Sodom and Gomorrah is one year when the Dead Sea retreated so much because of the conditions they found a graveyard somewhere under the silt at the southern end of the Dead Sea lie two cities that suffered a terrible disaster.

And that disaster came from the hand of God. God destroyed those two cities. It was God who sent the flood in the days of Noah.

It was not a human disaster. It wasn't as a result of global warming. It was at the hands of Almighty God. Why would God do this? Why would God cut a man down?

Why would God remove a person? Why would God destroy a city? Why? Well I'm pleased you asked. The answer is told in our parable.

[20:23] In Luke chapter 13 look with me in verses 6 to 9 in the second part of our gospel reading. This is a simple parable which doesn't mean a lot to us because we don't live in the Middle East.

But if you go to the Middle East and you see the little vineyards with a few vines hanging around the ground and every now and again above the grapes from time to time you will notice there is a fig tree by those vines.

Not in every case but in some cases. A fig tree in a vineyard was in fact in a very privileged position. Normally fig trees were put out of the vineyard where the soil was too shallow for the vines and they just had to get a living among the rocks.

But to put a fig tree in the vineyard where the soil was so deep and clean and cultivated and manured was to put at risk the vineyard and the harvest of grapes.

Why use the rich soil of the vineyard for the fig tree? Why? And yet here in our passage is a man who put a fig tree in his vineyard.

[21:41] He gave it every chance. He watched over it. He gave it the best soil the most favoured position. Most horticulturalists say it takes about three years for a fig tree to mature and produce fruit.

And three years later the man came and looked at this fig tree and what do we read in the parable? There were no figs. Not a single one. And what is the man's reaction?

For three years he has not had grapes from the ground. For three years he has given the best soil and the most favoured position to the fig tree and he hasn't got a fig.

after three years. What does he do? He cuts it down. The owner of the vineyard in this parable is undoubtedly Almighty God and it is undoubtedly a story that is aimed first at the Jewish people because they are so often described in the Old Testament as God's vineyard.

He took those Jewish people remember from slavery in Egypt and horrible conditions. He put them in the healthy hills of his chosen land the beautiful land we call Canaan and he gave them the land his vineyard and he planted Israel right in the middle of it and he gave them his word and he gave them his blessing and he gave them his love and he gave them his grace.

[23:06] He did everything he could to get that tree to go then grow and centuries later he looked at Israel and he wasn't getting one single thing back and God said I must cut them down I must cut them down they must leave the promised land and if we're looking honestly at this passage as difficult as it is we must also realise it applies to the church how long have we been coming to Holy Trinity Syracuse how long have you been coming and I wonder when you last made an attempt to share your faith with someone outside of the church and win them for Christ you've come here to what I believe is very fertile ground to Holy Trinity Syracuse a place that is well manured you are in a favoured position and so am I if I do not bring fruit to God and if he gets nothing out of my episcopal ministry as your bishop if I don't bring fruit to him then I believe according to this passage he has every right and is fully justified in cutting me out of the pulpit if I'm not bearing fruit for his kingdom if I'm just taking up valuable space if I'm wasting his vineyard and there perhaps could be another minister who's bearing more fruit who might come in and take my place in the same way brothers and sisters and I say this very respectfully but very solemnly if you have been coming to God's church for some years and receiving the rich teaching of his word week by week the holy food of the sacrament of his body and blood the precious fellowship of being among

God's people and if God gets nothing back if all of a sudden coming to church is more about you than it is about God then does God not only have one choice if you are filling a seat that could be occupied by someone who might want to love God and be fruitful for him and do something about what he says surely brothers and sisters as difficult as it sounds and as difficult it is for me to proclaim it this is how we must apply Luke chapter 13 we are remember as our brother read to us in the Old Testament reading talking about the God who is the I am who I am the God who is the will be who I will be solemn words yes I know and yet there's another insight in this parable look with me again Luke 13 there were two people in the story do you recall there was an employer and an employee who tended the fruit and the vines the gardener the gardener came to the owner and said to the owner please please just give me a little longer one more chance let me really give this tree every attention

I can and we'll see if we can get some fruit out of it the owner said alright we'll give it one more year one more year this is 8 and 9 of Luke chapter 13 who is the gardener in this parable well without any doubt the gardener is Jesus it is the Lord Jesus who intercedes with God the Father and says give that person at Holy Trinity Syracuse one more chance give that bishop in the Anglican church one more chance give them another year see if they become a fruitful member see if they start winning others see if they catch fire just give them another year and I wonder as I was preparing this morning and thought about my own ministry among you and then thinking about yours I wonder how many of us are here this morning because Jesus intercedes for us with the Father and has asked him to give us another chance one more year

I imagine it's certainly true of me the owner of the vineyard almighty God listens to the gardener Jesus and the response is made well let us apply this to the Jewish people first of all in Jesus' day Jesus knew that the Jews deserved to be cut down and removed from the promised land he said to

God sent that disaster at his hand in the year AD 70 God the Father may have done this much earlier but Jesus had interceded on the cross Father forgive them for they know not what they do Jesus has made possible another chance that is the testimony of our Lord his cross has given us all another chance and we sit here in 2016 AD we have had these 2000 years in the church only because Jesus said to the Father give the fig tree one more year give it another chance you see my brothers and sisters this applies not just to the Jews and not just to the nations of the world it applies to every Christian disciple of Christ because God can cut you down and give you your place to another who will produce fruit oh Jesus plead for me plead for us for the truth is that though the gardener persuaded the owner to give one more year the owner must make a deadline and the simple fact is that

God and in some circumstances here in this gospel passage is one Jesus tells us it is satan who is causing suffering not in every circumstance but in some Jesus accepted that explanation and so must we when a woman look in our passage verses 10 to 17 when a woman who had been ill for 18 years was brought to Jesus he said ought not this woman a daughter of Abraham notice whom satan bound for 18 years it wasn't God causing that suffering it wasn't doctors causing that suffering it was satan who was causing that suffering and Jesus accepts that explanation well let me conclude every christian who approaches the problem of suffering approaches this problem remember under the shadow of the cross yes the bible presents us with Jesus on the cross as a God who suffers with us and a God who suffers for us a God who loves us so deeply that he would suffer such humiliation and agony and death a God of mercy a God who feels so deeply for his people but if ever the question could be answered why does

Jesus the Messiah in his name we pray amen in the name of God the Father God the Son and God the Holy Spirit amen to |