

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

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[0 : 0 0] let's turn to Luke chapter 13 and verse 6 and he told this parable a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came seeking fruit on it and found none and he said to the vine dresser look for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and I find none cut it down why should it use up the ground and he answered him sir let it alone this year also until I dig round it and put on manure then if it should bear fruit next year well and good but if not you can cut it down just over a year after the last Glasgow disaster when a helicopter crashed into a crowded pub Glasgow witnessed yet another episode where six people in a moment of time lost their lives in an apparent freak accident and the whole world along with the rest of the country stands aghast at such an event it's not just Glasgow of course the whole world witnesses from time to time in various places similar events as we speak 162 passengers have been lost on a plane that just disappeared last night or yesterday over the Java sea meanwhile there are other forms of disasters in the world some of them which we would call natural disasters every loss of life is a disaster everyone is someone's tragedy and I'm very conscious of course that in a building that with the people that we have this evening that it's very few of us have not witnessed or experienced loss in some form or another I know you have either by way of something naturally that's happened an accident old age sickness or in some parts of the world there are atrocities there are murders there is war there are people being killed at the hands of other people and these are the two incidents that were taken to Jesus as examples by some people in this chapter at the beginning of the chapter there appears to have been two historic events and here is where the Bible is bang up to date the Bible is always bang up to date but its relevance in this chapter it touches the very heart of a question that everyone has asked from time to time and that is the question of suffering why does God allow things to happen why does he allow accidents to happen either on a small scale or on a grand scale why does he allow evil to take place in this world either on a small scale or on a grand scale why does a good God if he really is a good God why does he allow such events to take place events that leave people heartbroken and wondering why within a few hours of the Glasgow disaster last Monday a sea of flowers as normally happens

at an event like this with messages on the flowers and one message stood out to me anyway amongst all the rest and the message was simply one word which was why why why well tonight I am not going to even attempt an answer to that question because it would be cruel to do so the last thing a grieving person wants to hear is some kind of clever explanation about the loss of someone who they cannot come to terms with because the answer to the question why is not even it might give rise to all kinds of clever thoughts but it's not going to give it's not going to bring the person back again and that's what causes the grief and the suffering and the bereavement it's the loss that causes the grief and the suffering in that great book in the Bible if you've never read it then I would suggest that you do the book of Job it comes just before Psalms where all of his family are taken away from him he loses all of his family and then he's struck down by the most painful and awful illness his friends come to him in the midst of his suffering and the first thing they do with him is the wisest thing of all they sit in silence with him and that was the best thing that they could possibly have done for him the moment they open their mouth the whole thing gets worse because they try to find some solution some answer to the situation that he's in that's not helpful at all so tonight I'm not going to offer any explanations because I don't have any and I suggest that if you're a believer tonight and when you're in that kind of conversation with someone who has lost a loved one don't ever try and give clever explanations even biblical ones even ones that you know are in the Bible because that's not what someone who is grieving needs to hear they need someone to be with them and someone to go with them and to stand shoulder to shoulder with them in their time of sadness that's what Jesus did when he visited the grave of his friend Lazarus who had just died he

worked with the family when he went to the home of Jairus who came to him his daughter was dying it he didn't just heal the girl he went with Jairus shoulder to shoulder with him so that he could accompany him along the way why because it was important that the man of sorrows was in every way like we are sorrowing and suffering bearing our calamities and our disasters that's what Jesus came into the world to do and to be the sin bearer and the sorrow bearer along with other people so it's important not to give what we think are easy answers because it's one thing to talk about a situation that we're not experiencing it's another thing altogether to be in that situation and we have to try and to empathize with those this evening who are broken in their hearts and who are wounded in their soul because of something that has I cannot imagine what it must be like three members of the same family just disappearing just dying right away I cannot imagine I cannot imagine one member let alone three members of the same family because of unexplained accident but I do want to come to this passage because it seems to touch on the issue and because I hope that it will give some comment it will not give the answer as to why but it will give God's word on a situation that arose which was connected because these people they they brought up two events that had taken place in recent history with Jesus one was where Pilate who was the governor at the time we all know who Pilate was he was the one who tried Jesus and found him guilty was the Roman governor at that time but here is a story which proves to us that Pilate was a ruthless man it appears that for some reason best known to himself he had taken several Galileans and he had killed them arbitrarily and he had not only done that but he had mixed their blood with their sacrifices as an offense as an affront to the Jewish people in that region there was also another incident at that time where a tower verse 4 or those 18 people on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them that's what we would call an accident the first one would be what we'd call an atrocity where someone has killed the Galileans but then the other one was an accident on which the tower of Siloam

I have no idea what the tower of Siloam was I can only imagine that it would have been a big construction and somehow it had collapsed and underneath were 18 people who unsuspecting people just like the people in Glasgow this week that tower had fallen and had killed them now the similarity is that these people were coming to Jesus and they were trying to make a connection the question on the card the message on the card said why?

and that question tries to make a connection the connection that the people in Jesus' day were making was a different one slightly different but they were still trying to make a connection in Jesus' day there was the notion that if something disastrous happened to you it may have had a connection between with something that you had done in the past there's got to be some connection there's got to be some way in which God has worked things out so that these people have died either at the hands of Pilate or having been underneath the tower of Siloam and Jesus' point is that's the wrong way to think the right way to think is to be aware that however these people died our time will come and unless we repent that we too you too you too he said will all likewise perish now the question that's asked in the 21st century still tries to make a connection it tries to ask why did this happen and very often the question goes on to ask why if there is a God which of course is the the prevailing question in a in a secular world if there is a God and if he is all powerful and he's able to prevent accidents or atrocities happening and if he is a good God then why does he not do so

[12:03] I think that question is worth exploring to some extent at least so that we'll have something to say to someone who asks us in a skeptical manner and there are no shortage of people who ask that kind of question and what there really is saying is I don't actually believe in God in the first place okay well if you don't then there's no point in asking the question is there seriously if you don't believe in God then there's no meaning to anything we're all here as an accident of history we're all here just arbitrarily the throw of a dice there's no reason for you and I being here we're just chemicals time and chance has produced us we're not we're not designed by anything or anyone there's no God there's no there's no mind in the universe there's no superior being there's no one who has willed us into existence we're just nothing actually we're of no value whatsoever so if good things happen well that just makes us feel good that's just if bad things happen well tough luck too bad it's neither one or the other mean anything in any particular order one is not better than the other whatever will be will be if it's a happy place so be it if it's a bad place so be it if you don't believe in God you have to reach that conclusion that's the only conclusion that there is if we are the products of billions of years of mindless thoughtless evolution but when you do believe in God that still doesn't get rid of the problem in fact the problem becomes accentuated

when you do believe in God because if there is a God and if he truly is a good God and if he truly is a powerful God all powerful able to do anything he wants to do then why do these things happen whether it's the tsunami that took the lives of 260,000 people or whether it's the awful unspeakable things that are happening in Pakistan or in Syria or in Iraq where thousands of people are being put to death at the hands of others what does God have to say about it is God doing anything about it and if so what is there an explanation to these things there are real questions that I believe that most if not all of us have wrestled with at some point in time well let's take the problem of human evil then let's take the problem of Pilate whether it's Pilate and the Galileans or whether it's

ISIS and the people who are being slaughtered right now by the extremists in Syria and Iraq what do you expect God to do if you're blaming God for human evil what do you expect God to do you say well I would expect him to remove the mass murderers of this world the abusers of this world the rapists of this world really why do you stop there why are you stopping at all if God is truly God and if he's good then he's perfectly good and he's comprehensively good but what you're doing is you're singling out the evil that you happen to disapprove of and don't like but if God was going to stop people doing evil then he has to stop people doing all kinds of evil not just the ones that you don't like and not just the ones that take away life evil is evil because God says so not because you say so very often when people point the finger at

God what they're really suggesting is they're putting themselves on the throne of judgment and saying here's what I would like God to do here's what I think God should be doing in the world but it's always selective it's always what I think but I put it to you tonight that if God really was going to stop everyone from doing anything sinful then we'd all fall into the same category it would mean that he would have to stop all dishonesty in the world have you ever been dishonest it would mean that God would have to stop all lying in the world have you ever lied it would mean that God would have to stop all sinful thoughts in the world have you ever had a sinful thought of course we have isn't it strange how when it comes to making judgments about what's good and bad that we actually quite like some of the bad because we take pleasure in some of the bad

God doesn't operate like that God is not hypocritical like you and I are for God bad is bad thoughts words and actions and for God to stop every single thought and word and actions would be a complete cessation of all liberty the fact is that human evil takes place because men and women choose themselves to do evil because they are free to choose to do evil and if God was going to stop that happening in every case then there would be no such thing as human liberty and that's a tragedy isn't it when it comes to Pilate and when it comes to Hitler and when it comes to people who have done awful things either on a grand scale or a small scale that they've done it because they choose to do so and remember this that if one person chooses to take the lives of other people it means that the human race has been infected with the ability to do so

I put it to you tonight that if one person if it's possible for one person to kill another person it's possible for you to kill another person and for me because we are all members of the human race no one is genetically disposed towards being a Hitler or a despot we're all members of the human race I find that really frightening I find that really unsettling because what I ask is why doesn't everyone murder why doesn't why isn't everyone a murderer and a killer that to me is a really interesting question and something that I wrestle with a lot when I read the Bible and what the Bible tells me well what about natural disasters like this one here and in this chapter where the tower of Siloam fell and killed 18 people well let me ask the same question as I asked before what do you want God to do about it do you want God somehow to stop to put his hand out as it were and stop accidents from happening just before they do so well you know think about that for a moment that just isn't realistic is it every time something was going to happen that God was going to somehow prevent it happening what kind of people would that turn us into what kind of people would we be if we knew that we could do anything we wanted and we could live any way we wanted and we would be kept perfectly safe you'd have every teenager and storm away going down the crummel street at 100 miles an hour every single night knowing that God was going to put his hand out and he was going to stop their cars from smashing into a wall or into other cars you know that that is completely impossible it doesn't make sense again again for the sake of human liberty and freedom and besides it's interesting isn't it how you can live your whole life and you never give a thought to God you take all the good things all the good things that he gives you from a day to day basis without giving a second thought

[21 : 14] I wonder how many Christmas dinners that they were having that were eaten this week without saying a grace without a second thought as to who gave the food that is before us I wonder how much enjoyment there was this week and no word about the baby whose birth we're supposed to be celebrating because it's an excuse to party as hard as we possibly can but yet when an accident happens you know what lots of people do they point the finger at God and they say it's his fault he should have done something all of a sudden God comes into the equation and we become hostile and we begin to blame God for what goes wrong in our lives that's not fair is it I put it to you tonight that is not fair for a person to live their whole life without acknowledging

God until something happens and then you blame them for what does happen the fact is that the world is not a safe place this evening and the Bible has an explanation as to why the world isn't a safe place and the explanation goes back to the chapter that we read or at least the chapter that we partly read in chapter 3 of Genesis the Bible doesn't try to pretend that there's no such thing as tragedy it's full of tragedy it's full of human suffering we were allowed to come alongside real people like you and I who themselves have gone through the most awful pain and anguish in the Old Testament and in the New Testament the Bible doesn't pretend that there are easy answers to these issues but what it does do it takes us all the way back and it tells us that we live in a broken world a world that has become separate from God in the two senses that we're talking about when Adam and Eve chose to go their own way and to take the forbidden fruit they created for themselves a separation in which they became gods of their own universe the masters of their own destiny instead of listening to

God and doing and living as he wanted them to and as they were designed to live they chose their own path and the moment they did that they consigned the entire human race to a life of greed and cheating and lying and killing and choosing to take the lives of other people that's why within a few short years the very first children that were born in the world the first child in fact that was born became the first murderer Cain he murdered his brother Abel and there that was only the beginning there on everything got steadily worse and worse and worse it wasn't God's fault it was man's fault it was Adam's fault and it still is man's fault because he chooses his own destiny because he's turned his back upon God but in the other sense the fall equally has the answer to the question what about natural disasters because when

Adam and Eve they chose to go their own way there was a separation that was created between the world and God in which the world became estranged from God and in which the entire creation we read that it groans because it is very different from the world that God created originally this world there's something desperately wrong with the world and the Bible tells us exactly what that problem is the world has become estranged has become separate from God and only God has the remedy and has the answer but tonight I tell you that God has given us the answer and the answer is not that he has taken the evil away from the world if he was going to do that he would have to remove every man woman and child because every one of us has been infected by sin but what God did was something that was that was unimaginable what God did was something that was unexpected he did something that was beyond our every anticipation he himself he chose to become a man himself he chose to come into this world he chose to become a baby born in Bethlehem and by so doing he chose to suffer the pain and the darkness and the suffering that it meant to be a human being in this world so that he could be alongside and so that he could know what suffering was what sorrow was what pain was there's one thing you cannot accuse God you can't accuse God of anything there's one thing you cannot accuse God of not understanding suffering he can he has he's been there he's been where you are he's been where in this world and he knows our every sadness from his own experience that's why the Bible tells us that he's a high priest that is touched with a feeling of our infirmities he wept at the grave of his friend

[27 : 01] Lazarus he knows from his own experience and that's why we can come to him tonight when things happen to us and know we can know that God is where we are we can know that he is a feeling for our infirmities and so the Bible does not shrink away from it it doesn't try and give any cheap explanations it takes us all the way back from the beginning and it shows us how God instead of abandoning this world as he could have done he could have abandoned this world to get on with it and to destroy itself no because he so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son who came into the world to seek and to save the people who were lost and hurting and heartbroken and desolate and lonely and shattered and that's what he found in this world a shattered world a world which needed his healing and a world which he came to restore back to

God himself so Jesus whilst all these people came to him with their questions he instantly he takes their mind away from the sceptical from the objective from the because it's easy enough to sit on the fence and ask all of these philosophical and religious questions it's a different thing altogether when we're in the place of suffering but it's also a different question when we're asking all these questions and when all the while we are ourselves in grave danger and that's where the people were because by trying to make this connection between the deaths of these people in Galilee and Siloam they were trying to somehow suggest that they must have done something wrong they were actually exonerating themselves because if nothing was happening to them then they must have done something right they must have done they must have lived lives which were acceptable before God and God was pleased with them but no said Jesus that's not the case at all the only difference between you and them is that their time has come yours hasn't yet and if you don't repent it will you will all likewise perish notice he says he doesn't say you will all perish but you will all likewise perish what does that mean it means that you will perish in the same hopeless way in which they perished without ever having come to faith in the one remedy that there is to be reconciled to God and of course we know what that remedy was it was him it was

Jesus Christ because he came into the world to seek and to save the lost now then he tells them this parable and the parable is one of the simplest parables that there is in the Bible but it's also a unique parable here it is in a nutshell a man planted fig tree in his vineyard and he came after a while seeking fruit on the fig tree as you do if you plant a fig tree then you have every right to come to it at the suitable time of the year next year or whatever and at harvest time you expect figs to be growing on the tree but instead of finding figs on the tree he found none and the owner said to him look I've had it for three years now and I've come seeking fruit on this fig tree I haven't found out as you do three years that's more than enough to expect to find fruit on a fig tree cut it down there is no alternative the thing is a waste of time cut it down but then the gardener said to him look hold on a minute hold on a minute just give me one chance one more year one more year and I'm going to try my best

I'm going to do everything I possibly can I'm going to pull out all the stops I'm going to manure it and I'm going to dig around it I'm going to put everything on it I'm going to try and nourish it as best I can to to try and encourage it to bring forth figs next year if it bears figs well and good if not then we'll cut it down and there was perfect agreement between the two of them but you know what and as far as I know correct me if I'm wrong this parable this story stands on its own do you know why it stands on its own do you know what is unique about this parable this parable is unique because it has no ending we actually don't know how it ends we don't know if in a year's time the owner went to it and he found figs or he didn't we don't know it kind of leaves us hanging in the air and kind of leaves you wondering well what is this all about well it's clear what it's about because if you read it in the context of every other parable in which Jesus came to announce the kingdom of God what he's saying is this the gardener and the owner are God and they planted this fig tree and they expect as you would normally do figs to be growing on the fig tree the fig tree is you and me and we've been planted in this world we've been placed in this world by the will and by the purpose of God it's you are here tonight because God wants you to be here he's made you he's designed you he's brought you into this world you're not here as an accident of science you're here because God has designed you to be a unique human being you bear your own unique qualities your personality your background your DNA every one of us is is a human being in our own right because God has designed us that way but he's done so for a purpose for a reason and the reason that you and I live in this world is for him to worship him to experience him to acknowledge him to glorify him to enjoy him to rejoice in him to be blown away by the reality and the grandeur and the majesty of

[34 : 00] God to live for him life is all about God but what we've said and dare I say this what you've said to God is no no life is not about God I'm wanting to push God away I don't want to think about him I want to live my life my own way it's not that I don't believe in God I believe that well I might be a God or not but I really don't want to give it too much thought because there's just too much to do in this world the more you fill your life with what you love doing the more God gets pushed out to the margins doesn't he and you end up not giving him a second thought whereas what God demands tonight is that he be at the very center of what you are and that's when you begin to live as never before instead of that you've convinced yourself that if God is in your life then you're going to be miserable quite the reverse the reason you're miserable is because

God is nowhere to be seen you've lived your life without him you've pushed him out there you've kept him out there and I can tell you this that the moment you bring him in and you give him his place in what you are in your hopes in your dreams in your ambitions your moment that you turn away from all the wrongdoing in your life and that you bow to him and give him his place then your life will change because he'll change it for you that's the fruit that God expects in every human being and he has done everything possible to bring out that fruit he's given his son to take away our sins he's given you all the privileges that you think back over the year there may have been bad things there may have been sad things there may have been awful things in your life and yet you can say that

God is good God is giving you all the privileges that you have had in the past year and you think about all of the air that we breathe the health and the strength that we have the mind that we have the success that we've had over the past year whatever that has been maybe it hasn't been much but it's been there and we're here we've survived another year and we're here listening to his word one more time but let me tell you this God is looking for that fruit the fruit is not perfection the fruit is not keeping the ten commandments as best you can the fruit is faith faith in Jesus Christ the one he has sent into the world to save you from your sin and this story tells us that God is not willing for anyone to perish he is patient and he will give that little while extra but a time will come when that will finish and when our lives will come to an end we don't know when that's going to be we don't know how long we've had one more year we don't know what the days ahead we're going to bring for any one of us but we know this that it is appointed unto man once to die what a waste for a person to live their whole lives for themselves and to refuse to discover the one the one key element in life which life is all about which is

God God himself who has the reason for our existence you think tonight of all the great things that God has given you you know there's even greater than that in the Lord Jesus Christ so why is there no end to this parable well perhaps so that Jesus would ask all of those people who listen to him to make up the end themselves to tell him what the end was and when you look at your own life as that fig tree that God has planted and he's nurtured and he's given time and again what will your what will the end of that parable be for you you can you alone can answer that question either by faith or continued unbelief

I pray that it will be faith in Jesus Christ let's bow our heads in prayer our father in heaven we thank you for your goodness to us in giving us your word that points us to Jesus we pray that that you will create faith within those this evening who do not follow Jesus pray that you will work in their hearts we pray that you will make your word the living word for them pray that as they reflect over where their lives are this evening that you will speak to them as never before in Jesus name amen well we're going to sing in closing and and and and