

## Why Did This Happen?

Luke 13:1-9

Crossroads Christian Church

Psalms 63:1-8

February 28, 2016

A man drives his car down the streets of Kalamazoo, Michigan, and shoots eight people at random; six die and one is critically wounded, and nobody knows why. A record-strength typhoon blasts through Fiji. Why? A child in the inner city takes a random bullet in a drive-by shooting, and is paralyzed for life. Why? A drunk driver crosses to the wrong lane and shatters the lives of a whole family. Why? The doctor gets your test results back and shakes her head sadly. Why?

Why? Why? Why? Sometimes things just don't make sense, we try to make sense of them anyway. Sometimes we ask why when we're looking for someone or something to blame. It was the doctor's fault. It was your fault. It was the government's fault. It was my fault. It was God's fault.

Or we just want to make sense of what happened, to understand it, so maybe we can fix it, or maybe somebody can. Or, some people say that there is no reason behind tragedies. Life is absurd, meaningless, and we're just the victims of random forces. That question of why has been asked, and attempt to answer it have been made, just about as long as there have been human beings. There's no single one-size-fits-all answer to the question of suffering in the Bible. Rather, the Bible is full of conversations about it. You hear different voices from different perspectives.

For example, part of the covenant that God had with the people of Israel involved consequences—if and then. If they stayed true to the covenant, loved and served God faithfully, followed God's laws, and were just and compassionate, then God promised them shalom—peace, prosperity, good, long life. On the other hand, IF they were to stray from the covenant, follow false gods, and plunder the poor and needy, then God would bring punishment down upon them—plagues, or armies, or locusts—until, broken or chastised, they would call to God in true repentance—and God would restore them. Almost all of the history books of the Old Testament followed that theme.

But what happened when you went from the general to the specific? Most Jewish people in biblical times believed that if individuals suffered, it was a consequence of their own sin, or maybe someone else's. If someone lost their sight, or caught leprosy, or had a stillborn or disabled child, it must have been something that they had done wrong, or said wrong, or thought wrong. They were being punished for their sins.

But other parts of the Bible offers challenges and correctives to that way of thinking. The book of Job says that yes, good people sometimes suffer miserably, and that to point out what sinners they are, is really unhelpful

and wrong. Job says, "Don't blame the victim!" God's ways are not our ways. Undeserved suffering is a mystery.

In the Psalms, people cry out in need, and pain, and anger, and ask God to bring them justice and healing. In today's Psalm, the singer begins by feeling separated by God—he thirsts for God like a dehydrated person in the desert thirsts for water.

"My whole being thirsts for you!  
My body desires you in a dry and tired land,  
no water anywhere." (vs. 1b)

But then there's movement from feeling God's absence, and the psalmist's spiritual thirst is quenched by a sense of God's presence, and the Psalm ends with the singer in a good place.

Proverbs usually toe the line that good, God-loving people will prosper and the wicked will suffer, but Ecclesiastes responds that it isn't all that simple.

Theologians have a fancy word for this whole discussion. It's called theodicy—how we understand the justice and goodness of God in a world where justice and goodness seem in short supply. How can God make bad things happen to innocent people? Or, if God doesn't make bad things happen, why does God allow bad things to happen? There are no pat answers—well, actually there are pat answers, but they don't work in real life.

Let's get back to the Bible, this time, the Gospel of Luke. One day, after Jesus had been warning the people of the destruction to come if they kept to their violent ways, after he had been calling them to repent and turn back to God, Jesus gave them a lesson from current events. Some people had given him some hot tips from the Herod the Fox News Channel. The Roman governor of Jerusalem, a Roman underling that we'll hear more from about later, Pontius Pilate, had his troops kill some Galilean people who had come to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. We don't know why Pilate decided to make examples of the Galileans. The Galilean's blood mixed with the blood of the animals they brought to sacrifice. Were they greater sinners than other Galileans whose lives were spared? We would say that it was human evil or systemic evil at work, and put the blame on the cold-blooded dictator. It wouldn't be a question of theology for us. But it was for them. And then Jesus told about workers who were building a tower at Siloam. The tower collapsed, and eighteen people perished beneath the rubble. We would wonder if the collapse was caused by shoddy workmanship, in which case it would be human or systemic evil, or if it fell because of an earthquake, which would be systemic evil. But back then, they asked, "were these people worse offenders than others in Jerusalem?"

Jesus didn't give the answers they expected. His answer was no; neither the Galileans killed by Pilate or the workers in Jerusalem killed by the falling tower were greater sinners than others. They weren't objects of God's wrath. Jesus didn't play the blame game. He didn't blame the victim. He did, however, warn his listeners. He called them to repentance. There isn't a one-on-one connection between sin and suffering, but there are consequences. Greater death, greater catastrophe would follow as a consequence for the nation's arrogance; for its oppression of the widows and orphans; for its violence; for its failure to follow the way of a loving God. Jesus called his society to take responsibility for its own actions, and to change its heart—that's what repentance is all about. It's not just wallowing in guilt, it's giving ourselves to turn away from our own selfishness, and to follow the path of God's love.

So—we can't play the blame game and assume that our neighbor's sorry plight is the result of their own sinfulness. Bad things often happen to good people and bad people their power around in destructive ways and yet still live long and prosper. God has given us free will, and we are free to make choices that help make our lives and the lives of other people better, or to make them worse. We live in a world where, because we are finite and limited, bad things just sometimes happen. Cells mutate and become cancerous. Warm and cool air clash and a tornado is formed. Tectonic plates shift and the earth quakes. A child is born with a birth defect. It happens. We learn to make do. We cope. We trust that even in those bad things, God is still at work to make things better.

There is a God, and, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, there is a moral arc in the universe that bends toward justice. God has put us here to make a positive difference in the world, and God works through us to help make it happen. Our actions, for better or worse, do have consequences. God still calls us to repent, to change our course, from selfish, violent ways, to love, grace and compassion.

We're doing God's work when we help to alleviate pain and suffering. That might be done locally, as when we take food to a sick or mourning friend, or as when an elder takes communion to a shut-in. That might be done globally, as when we give to Week of Compassion. Week of Compassion is always on the scene on our behalves when disaster strikes. Penny Ross-Corona was telling other ministers the other day how the director of Week of Compassion called her after the flooding in eastern Missouri and southern Illinois a few weeks ago, to ask if there were churches or families that needed help. When disaster strikes, we can sit around and argue about whose fault it was, like those in Jesus' time—or we can do something to reach out and help. The Week of Compassion offering that we'll be collecting is a wonderful way to do that.

Sometimes we enjoy a good and happy life, and sometimes we struggle under life's burdens and loads. In good times and in bad, God is with us. As Jesus said, "the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike." God's good gifts, God's grace, is available to all. We don't have answers to the questions of why but we do have God's presence to comfort and to guide us. As Frederick Buechner puts it, "God doesn't reveal his grand design. He reveals himself. He doesn't show us why things are as they are. He shows us his face."<sup>1</sup> (unquote) And that's enough. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words*, HarperOne, 2004, p. 394.