

## Draw Near and Experience God's Grace

### Luke 13:1-9

#### INTRODUCTION

#### IT'S NOT FAIR!

Those were the words of the woman on the other end of my phone line a few weeks ago. The caller ID said she had a Florida number, but I don't know where she was actually calling from. She told me that she had been calling around to several churches, trying to talk to a pastor. She needed answers.

- Frankly, I expected her to ask me for money, but the conversation went in a totally different direction.
- "It's not fair," she said. "And I want you tell me why God allows that stuff to happen."
- "What's not fair?" I asked.
- She then proceeded to rattle off a host of things that had gone wrong in her life, everything from broken relationships to family deaths to job losses and so on.
- She went on for several minutes. When she was finished, she ended with a slightly modified version of her original question:

"Why would God allow that to happen **to me**?"

It's a great question. We have all asked it, right?

- Why would God allow my Mom to die? It's not fair.
- It's not fair that my brother is smarter, my sister is prettier.
- It's not fair that I work like a dog and other people get everything for free.

We could go on. It's a long list.

The people who came to see Jesus in our Gospel text described an unfair event from their own experience.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. (Luke 13:1)

- Pontius Pilate – the same Pontius Pilate that would sign off on the crucifixion of Jesus – had rightly decided Jerusalem needed a new and improved water supply. He decided to pay for it with funds from the Jewish Temple's treasury.
- Technically there wasn't anything wrong with that plan ... except that the Jews hated Pilate. Any idea Pilate had was a bad idea.
- And so Pilate using their money didn't go over well. Large crowds – mobs, really – began to protest outside of Pilate's residence.
- Pilate instructed his soldiers to mingle with the protesters and to disguise their military uniforms with the same kind of cloaks the people wore.
- Instead of carrying their swords, they carried small daggers.
- When the signal was given, they were to attack the protesters and disperse them.

- The soldiers did that, but in the process they also killed a large number of innocent bystanders. These innocent bystanders were not protesting. They were in Jerusalem to offer their required sacrifices.

How is that fair? That's the question posed to Jesus. Rather than answer their question, Jesus reminded them of another situation:

Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? (Luke 13:4)

Behind both of these questions raised by the Jews that day was a deep theological issue. The Jews believed there was an unbreakable connection between your sin and your suffering.

- So why do bad things happen to good people? The Jews would tell you because they are really not that good. God is punishing them for their sins.

You've heard it before. That's the accusation made against Job in the Old Testament book that bears his name. Job, according to the text:

... was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. (Job 1:1)

But then everything in his life went wrong. Job lost his family, his wealth, his health. He lost the respect of his wife. It was as bad as it could get. One of the friends who came to "comfort" him put into words what everyone else in the room was thinking:

Has a truly innocent person ever ended up on the scrap heap?  
Do genuinely upright people ever lose out in the end?  
It's my observation that those who plow evil  
and sow trouble reap evil and trouble. (Job 4:7-8)

In other words, "Job, stop playing games. You are hiding a major sin, and now you are paying for it."

- Job maintained his composure for a long time, but finally he cried out "God, it's not fair."
- You are in good company when you cry that too!

When life seems unfair, Jesus invites you to DRAW NEAR to His cross. As you do, you will discover:

### **DISCOVERY #1: SUFFERING IS A PART OF A FALLEN WORLD**

There was no suffering in the Garden of Eden. But when our ancestors, Adam and Eve, chose to disobey the God who created them and who loved them, suffering became a reality. Like it or not, you and I are still living in a world affected by their sin.

Think about it this way: After a nuclear explosion, "fallout" lingers for many years. We are still living in the "fallout" from the fall of man. God is not the source of evil; Satan and sin are responsible. But we suffer because of it.

Because of sin we have to share this planet with some wicked people.

- Pilate was a cruel Roman governor.
- Vladimir Putin is an evil tyrant.
- The gunmen who rush into schools, churches and shopping centers are wicked.
- You even carry a key in your pocket because you had to lock something today in order to keep it safe.

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

Sin didn't only impact people, it impacted our whole world. Every fiber of creation has been tainted by it.

- Why are there tornados, earthquakes, or accidents in which people are hurt or die?
- Why is there cancer, infection, and disease?
- It's because we live in a fallen, messed up world. The world does not run like it should because of sin.

## **DISCOVERY #2: SUFFERING IS UNRELATED TO GOODNESS**

Any time someone suffers there is a human tendency for us to think, "Maybe they are just getting what they deserve." The world calls it "karma." That's a Buddhist principle, not a Christian one.

So when Jesus asks His audience, "Do you think those upon whom the tower fell were worst sinners than you? He is expecting an obvious "No!"

- We think bad people should be the ones to suffer and good people shouldn't. But that's not the way it works.

The great theologian and writer, R.C. Sproul wrote,

In effect what Jesus was saying was this: "You people are asking the wrong question. You should be asking me, 'Why didn't that tower fall on MY head?'" (The Holiness of God, p. 161)

In fact, the Bible promises those who follow Christ WILL suffer. But the good news is that any suffering we endure in this world is only temporary. Look at these verses:

We share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:17-18)

## **DISCOVERY #3: SUFFERING AMPLIFIES GOD'S MESSAGE: REPENT OR PERISH!**

When Jesus was asked why Pilate killed the people or why the 18 died when the tower fell, Jesus gave the same reply twice:

But unless you repent, you too will all perish. (Luke 13:3 and 5)

The great Christian intellectual C.S. Lewis wrote:

Pain insists upon being attended to; 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." (The Problem of Pain, p. 22)

When everything is going wonderful in your life, you may not think you need God. But suffering gets our attention and reminds us that we cannot make it without God.

- Those who are suffering right now are not doing so because they are bigger sinners than the rest of us.
- Those who are doing great right now are not better Christians than the people who are hurting.

God doesn't create evil or suffering, but He most certainly will use the suffering that is a part of this fallen world to call you to DRAW NEAR to the cross.

#### **DISCOVERY #4: GOD EXTENDS HIS GRACE FOR A LITTLE WHILE MORE**

On the surface, it may appear the little story about the fig tree is unrelated to what Jesus is saying about suffering and repentance but He uses it as a powerful story to illustrate His point.

- The owner of the farm is God, and the fig tree is us.
- God is ready to cut the fig tree down, because for three years there is no fruit, but He decides to give it another season to see if it will become fruitful.

You can't miss the point. Jesus had been preaching for three years, and within a few months, He will go to the cross. Israel had not yet become fruitful in accepting the Messiah, so God was giving them a longer period to repent and accept Jesus. The message is the same to us today.

If you haven't trusted Jesus as your Savior yet, God is giving you another chance to surrender to Him.

- Insurance policies have what is called a "grace period." If you don't pay your premium on time, the insurance company extends your coverage for a short period of time, hoping you'll pay the premium. But if you don't pay the premium, the grace period runs out and the policy will be cancelled.
- God has a grace period, too, and we are in it today. We are living in the age of grace today.
  - Salvation is absolutely free—but there is a limit to your grace period. There is a Divine Deadline.
  - I don't know how much longer I will live. My medical checkups say I am in great health. Just this week my doctor emailed me after reviewing my most recent lab work to say "I have no concerns."

- In 20 years I will have lived as long as my father. But I have already lived 20 years longer than my mother. This might be my last sermon or you just might have to listen to a few more.
- But when my deadline comes, I will be done. And my response to the invitation of God to DRAW NEAR to the cross will determine what happens next.

I remember a line from a sermon from one of the old preachers when I was a kid:

You are either going to meet the undertaker, or the upper-taker. Either way, you'd better be ready to meet God!"

The most important question is not "Why do good people suffer?" The most important question is "Am I ready to meet God?"

### **APPLICATION**

After the terrorists hit the twin towers on September 11, 2001 President Bush declared the following Friday to be a Day of National Prayer and Remembrance. A service was held at the National Cathedral in Washington. Billy Graham was the main speaker.

In his message that day, Dr. Graham spoke of the mystery of suffering. He said:

I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction.

I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign, and He's a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst of suffering.

Dr. Graham went on to say:

For the Christian, the Cross tells us that God understands our sin and suffering, for He took upon Himself in the person of Jesus Christ our sins and our suffering. And from the cross, God declares to each of us, "I love you. I know the heartaches and the sorrows and the pains that you feel. But I love you."

The story does not end with the Cross, for beyond the tragedy of the Cross there is the empty tomb. Because of the Resurrection we can have eternal life, for Christ conquered evil and death, and suffering and hell.

Without the cross of Christ, our sufferings and those of the people around have no meaning. Those sufferings become nothing more than meaningless encounter with pain. But DRAW NEAR. Because Jesus suffered and died and rose victorious over the grave, we have hope! Because in the cross we experience God's amazing grace.

Amen.