

Job 1:13-22; Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-7
Our Comfort in Trouble
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There seem to be a lot of tornadoes in this neck of the woods. A tornado had devastated parts of Jackson a few months before we moved here in the year 2000. We bought a house that had lost two big trees in its front yard and also sustained some damage in that tornado. I remember that at the time, a local theologian had written an article in the local paper arguing that we can't blame God for tornadoes because God has no control over weather events such as tornadoes. I also remember that many objected to that article because a God who can't control a tornado doesn't sound very much like the God of the Bible.

Let me read you a little bit about the God of the Bible:

Jeremiah 10:12-13

- 12 He has made the earth by His power, he has established the world by His wisdom, and has stretched out the heavens at His discretion.
- 13 When He utters His voice, there is a multitude of waters in the heavens: "And He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, he brings the wind out of His treasuries."

And let me read you a little bit about the Jesus of the Bible:

Matthew 8:26b-27

- 26 ... Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.
- 27 So the men marveled, saying, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"

This is the God of the Bible. He brings the wind out of His treasuries. This is the Jesus of the Bible. The winds and the sea obey Him.

But if the God of the Bible is more than powerful enough to control a tornado, then why does He allow them to happen and why does He allow them to harm people, the just as well as the unjust? We will be considering that question today, and we will do so under three headings: the riddle, the responsibility and the reason.

First, I was to discuss **the riddle** in the sense of a paradox and also in the sense of a mystery that is beyond our understanding. I also want to begin by looking at our passage from Job. I chose the passage from Job for today because it mentions a tragic loss of life involving a so-called act of nature. This "act of nature" was a great wind which collapsed a house, and it could very well have been a tornado.

Job 1:18-22

- 18 While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house,
- 19 "and suddenly a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it

- fell on the young people, and they are dead; and I alone have escaped to tell you!"
- 20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped.
- 21 And he said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."
- 22 In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong.

Now not everyone responds to such occurrences the way Job did. Some have responded to tornadoes and tsunamis and hurricanes by becoming embittered and by saying that they no longer believe in the existence of a personal God. They say that if there really is a God, then He would not allow these things to happen. They say that if there really is a God, then He would not allow things to happen which cause human misery and suffering. Such a response to tragic events is really rather superficial. Such a response is really a self-contradictory reaction which can only lead to despair, to a loss of all hope. You see, if there really is no personal God, then how can anything really be defined as tragic?

Here is the riddle in the sense of a paradox: some people say they no longer believe in God because of the tragedies which occur from time to time, and yet events are tragic only if God exists. We have to think honestly about the implications of a universe where God does not exist, a universe where the ultimate and lasting reality is an impersonal cosmos with no eyes to see, no ears to hear, no mind to know and to remember, and no heart to feel. Some ask if a falling tree makes a sound if

there is no one there to hear it fall. An equally good question is whether something can be tragic in an ultimate and lasting sense if there is no personal God to feel the pain of the tragedy.

If there is no God, then there is also really nothing special about human life or horrendous about human suffering. Human life is sacred only because humanity is created in the image of God. Deny God, and there is nothing unique or special about human life. Human suffering becomes only a series of biochemical stimuli in a meaningless world. If the human race is nothing but an evolutionary fluke that arose from a primordial soup, if the human being is only a sophisticated biological organism or a complex organic machine, then what is so tragic about the loss of human life?

Beyond that, deny God and the very concepts of good and evil lose all meaning. If there is no reality beyond the material world of energy and matter, then any sense that something is good or evil is a naive fantasy and illusion.

In contrast, acknowledge God, and evil is evil, and human life is special. Unanswered questions still remain, but they are mysteries we can live with through faith. How can God be in sovereign control of history without being to blame for the evil that occurs? I cannot fully answer that question, but then why should I expect to fully understand God? The eternal is simply beyond our full comprehension. His thoughts and ways are above our own as the heavens are high above the earth. How inscrutable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

First there is a riddle in the sense of a paradox, and there is a riddle in the sense of a mystery we have to live with by faith. God is able to create free agents, both human and angelic, who make real decisions for which they alone and not God are responsible. Yet God is able to do this without losing His sovereign control. I don't understand how God is able to do that. Doing that is not only beyond my own ability to do but also beyond my own ability to comprehend. But does my limited comprehension limit what Almighty God can do? Of course not! We must accept this mystery in faith, or else we descend into a cold, impersonal world where the tragic has no meaning.

In our passage from Job, we see that Job accepted that God was in control of the fatal wind storm. He said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away." We also see that Job did not blame God for what happened. Job said, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." And the comment is made, "Job did not charge God with wrong."

That brings us to our second point, and that is **the responsibility**. Who is responsible for such tragic events? The answer is, all those who rebel against God's rule. Think back to Genesis one. There we read that the material universe when first formed was without form and void. It was a hostile, chaotic environment not compatible with life. Life is delicate, and there is a very narrow range of physical conditions within which life is possible. Over the first three days of the creation week, God transformed the chaos into an orderly cosmos, into a friendly environment capable of sustaining life. And then over the next three days of the creation week, God created life upon earth and commanded, Be fruitful and multiply.

When Adam sinned against God, a curse descended upon this orderly, controlled creation. Adam rejected God as His moral authority and foolishly believed that he could be his own moral authority and survive apart from God. God's judgment upon sin is to grant sin the independence it desires. To the degree that God in judgment withdraws from creation in answer to sin's cry for autonomy, that is the common curse. To the degree that God withdraws His upholding hand from creation, creation descends back into chaos, and this world becomes hostile to life. To the degree that God continues to uphold creation in spite of humanity's rebellion, that is God's common grace. Thus God continues to make His sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

There is common grace, and there is the common curse. There is also special grace, and there is also the special curse. Special grace is God's sovereign gift of salvation given to the undeserving sinner. Special curse is God's just judgment upon a sinner for a specific sin. Sometimes we experience pain or suffering as a direct consequence of something evil we do. A person is sexually promiscuous, and he acquires a sexually transmitted disease. That is a special curse. A person gets drunk regularly, and he develops liver disease. That is a special curse. The painful experience has some direct relationship to some sinful action. Other times there is no apparent direct relationship. This is the common curse.

The responsibility for the common curse belongs not to God but to Adam who sinned in the garden of Eden. Adam was the

father of all humanity. Every human being who will ever exist was latently present with and in Adam when God created him from the dust of the earth. Even Eve came from a rib from Adam's side. Adam in the garden represented the totality of humanity, and in that federal sense with Adam violating a covenant as our representative, the common curse is the responsibility of all humanity, including you and me.

Humanity and not God is responsible for the common curse. And God sincerely and genuinely grieves over the suffering which results from humanity's sin. Our Savior wept at Lazarus' tomb, and God calls upon us, His people, to weep with those who weep in this world of sin and misery.

In our passage for today from John chapter nine about the man born blind, we see that the disciples did not understand very well the concept of the common curse. The disciples assumed that whenever anyone has some affliction, it must be a divine judgment for some specific sin. Yet how could this be true when someone was born with an affliction? Since this man was born blind, when could he possibly have sinned as a basis for receiving this affliction? Is it possible for a baby to sin in the womb and then to be judged with an affliction before he is born? If that is not the case, then what about the man's parents? Is it possible that he was born blind because of something sinful his parents had done before he was born?

No, Jesus said. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him."

And that brings us to our last point, **the reason**. Jesus said that God had a purpose for this man's being born blind. Back in eternity past when God was planning all of history, God had a purpose for allowing this man to suffer this particular manifestation of the common curse upon humanity. God ordained that this man would be born blind and would live in blindness up into his adult years so that Jesus would have this opportunity to perform this miracle for God's glory and for the advancement of God's kingdom.

We need to remember that God is so perfect, so wonderful, so awesome that there is no greater privilege than to bring Him glory, to manifest His greatness, and to advance His kingdom on earth. Our confidence in the midst of the difficulties of life is that God has ordained everything to work for His glory and for the ultimate good of those who love God. We rightfully mourn over the pains of this life, but we also take hope that God has a greater purpose in them. This man had suffered blindness from birth to adulthood, but there was a glorious purpose rooted in the eternal.

We find this same basic message in the book of Job. There was a purpose in Job's sufferings. It was to bring glory to God. Satan charged that Job was faithful to God only because God put a hedge around Job and shielded him from suffering. God responded by removing that hedge and permitting Satan to afflict Job. Job brought God glory by remaining faithful in the midst of his suffering.

Our passage in Luke reminds us of another way in which God works good for His people through suffering and tragedy. Jesus said that a tower fell on eighteen people and killed them, and then he asked if these eighteen were worse people than all the others who escaped this fate. The answer is that they were not. This is a part of the common curse upon all humanity. Yet Jesus tells us that tragedies such as this should motivate us to repent of our sins. When we see the common curse upon humanity as the consequence of Adam's first sin, we should remember that our own sins will have their consequences as well. Just as the sin of Adam has brought a common curse on all humanity, our own specific sins will bring a special curse upon us unless we find salvation. We should repent of our sins and turn from them to Christ for forgiveness and deliverance.

In his classic little book **The Problem of Pain**, C.S. Lewis said that God uses pain to get our attention. C.S. Lewis called pain God's megaphone. Let me read you a short quotation from this classic book **The Problem of Pain**:

We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities;
... But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

Here is another purpose in tragedy and affliction. God uses pain to wake us up and to remind us what is really important in this short life we are living. God uses pain to get our attention and to remind us what things in this life are temporary and quickly passing away and what things in this life are lasting and

preludes to eternal joys. When we are busy enjoying the more superficial pleasures of this life, we tend to neglect the more substantial pleasures of life. When we are obsessed with the more shallow satisfactions of life, we tend to neglect the deep satisfaction which can only be found in a personal relationship with God and Christ.

We also believe that while the sufferings of this life are temporary, the rewards which God gives the faithful are eternal. We believe that in comparison with the greatness of the glory to come, the worst sufferings in this life are but a light affliction.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

- 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,
18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

We can much more easily endure difficulties and afflictions when we know they have a purpose, when we know they are temporary, and when we know they will be followed by something that is both permanent and glorious beyond imagination.

As we think about the recent tornado, let us not despair. Remember that God is in control. This too is part of His sovereign plan for history. He will somehow work this to His

own glory and the genuine good of all those who love Him. He will somehow work this to the advancement of His kingdom and the discipling of the nations, thus bringing salvation and deliverance to this world.

As we think about the recent tornado, let us also not grow bitter and jaded. Let us not presumptuously think that the suffering of others bothers us more than it grieves God. Remember God's response to human suffering was to experience it Himself.

John 3:16

16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Let us weep with those who weep. And let us point to the common curse as a warning of the special curse we all deserve because of our sins. Let us point to the common curse, the misery of this life, as a warning to all that we need Jesus. Only Jesus can deliver us from our sins and the judgment they deserve. Jesus became a curse upon the cross that we might be blessed of God with special grace. Only Jesus can deliver us from the misery of this life and the sin which is its root cause.