

The Word of the Lord from Luke 13: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. The Question, and Jesus' Answer

Why do bad things happen? Why does God permit bad things to happen—or does He cause bad things to happen? And why do bad things happen to good people? What about those hurricanes in Florida or the floods in Nebraska and the suffering that continues there? Why poverty and famine? School shootings? Sick kids? Terrorist attacks? War? Genocide? Why cancer? Why heart trouble? Why? Why? Why?

Why do bad things happen? Theologians call it the problem of evil. There are all sorts of answers to this prickly question. In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Harold Kushner concluded that God is indeed good, but He's not all-powerful and He can't stop all the bad stuff from happening. That's not much of a comfort, that God is doing the best He can right now. There will be those who argue that God is manifestly cruel, no better than the false Greek gods of old, inflicting torment on different people at different times for His interest and entertainment. There are the fatalists who simply say, "That's just how things are going to be." And then there are perhaps the most embarrassing of all—false prophets who are convinced they know better. Case in point: after an earthquake in Haiti a few years ago, Pat Robertson was quick to declare that this was God's punishment for a 400-year-old pact with the devil made by rebellious slaves. Rev. Robertson needs to repent and read his Bible quite a bit more.

Why does evil happen when it does? One of the best texts in Scripture to address this matter is our Gospel lesson for today, where we're presented with two situations that sum up a lot of evil. It's good to keep in mind the framework of thought in Judea at the time: it's a common belief that misfortune is the direct result of sin, while blessings are the direct result of obedience. Think, for instance, of an incident in John 9, where the disciples see a blind man and ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2) It's similar to the notion of karma today, I suppose, where what goes around comes around. It's similar to you suffering misfortune and saying, "What have I done to deserve this?" It's how people think—that God works like a king, punishing those who disobey with all sorts of trouble, and rewarding those who obey with health and prosperity.

So two situations come up in conversation in our Gospel lesson. The people bring up the first one: "There were some present at that very time who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." We don't have a further historical record, but it's a blasphemous crime: while some Galilean pilgrims were offering sacrifices at the temple, probably at Passover, Pilate evidently had them slaughtered. It would be the equivalent of a ruler gunning us down while we were kneeling at the Lord's Supper. So why did it happen? Were the Galileans guilty of some sin? Was it the fact that they're Galileans, since Galilee was known as "Galilee of the Gentiles" and tended to play a little fast and loose with all of those ceremonial laws? What did they do to deserve this? Jesus' response is hardly satisfying. He says, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

That's the answer Jesus gives to the problem of evil. In case people didn't quite catch it, He goes further: He brings up the tower of Siloam, which once stood in Jerusalem but collapsed

and killed eighteen. Why them? Was it because they were more depraved than those around them? Hey, could it be because they were kind of snotty Judeans who looked down their noses at Galileans and thought they were better, so God taught them a lesson? Why did it happen—and happen to them? Here is what Jesus says: “Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Again, that is how Jesus answers the problem of evil. To illustrate further, He tells them a 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 vinedresser, ‘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 around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’” In parables, a vineyard is code for Israel. The fig tree in the vineyard is supposed to be producing fruit, but it’s not. It’s taking up space, and it looks better suited for firewood. But the vinedresser pleads for more time, in the hope that the fig tree will change. The people of Judea, says Jesus, should be bearing good fruit for the Lord. If they do not, they will face judgment; but the Lord is mercifully providing more time for them to repent, lest they all likewise perish.

That is Jesus’ answer to the problem of evil.

II. Not “Because,” But “Repent”

If you find the Lord’s answer a little unsatisfying or incomplete, there’s a reason for it: Jesus doesn’t answer the question. At least, not the way we’d like Him to. When we ask Why?, we’re expecting a Because.

Jesus doesn’t give a Because. He gives a Repent.

And because Jesus doesn’t give a Because answer, we’re not allowed to, either. When we try to explain why bad things happen and solve the problem of evil, we’re saying more than God tells us. As Christians, we are bound to His Word, not what we think His Word ought to say.

To put it another way, the only questions we can ask are the ones He gives us the answers to.

But although Jesus didn’t give a Because, He did give a Repent. That’s a better answer than you might first think. So to prepare you for the bad things that do happen and will happen, I would bid you to keep the following three points in mind.

The first is the most difficult for us sinners to accept: because of our sin, we don’t deserve any good from God at all. As we say in the confession of sins, we deserve God’s “temporal and eternal punishment.” Temporal and eternal punishment is not an occasional thing: it’s an eternal, ongoing display of God’s wrath. That is what we deserve for our sin. So when we get uptight and ask the unanswerable “why do bad things happen” to us, it may well be a signal that we’ve blasted by the more appropriate question: “Why does any good happen to us at all?”

It’s a better question for two reasons. First, it recognizes the depth of our sinfulness. Second, the Lord makes that answer very clear: good things happen because God pours out all sorts of good on you for the sake of Jesus Christ. And, as the parable declares, He continues to work good throughout the world to give the fig tree more time to bear fruit—to give more people time to repent before Judgment Day.

Dear friends, I would encourage you daily to renew in your mind the truth that every good thing is an undeserved gift of God. The more we think we deserve things from God, the more we deny our sinfulness; and the more we will grow angry with God when we do not receive what we think we deserve. The depth of our original sin is far beyond our ability to contemplate, and it is a doctrine that many Christians dismiss, preferring instead to focus on the glory of God. But here is the question for such: how can you truly give God all the glory when you deny the magnitude of your sin and thus reserve some glory for yourself?

That is the first point: because of our sin, we don't deserve anything good at all. That's what makes Jesus' call to "Repent!" in our text such a blessing—although we deserve nothing good, He bids us to be forgiven and alive in Him. He offers His grace to us freely.

The second point is this: God treats us like children and keeps some things to Himself. Sooner or later, parents find themselves saying to their kids for the best of reasons, "I can't explain why right now. Just do what I say. You have to trust me." God says the same to us. He treats us like children—and with good reason: we are His children! He has made us His children for the sake of Jesus, and He assures us that He is "our Father, who art in heaven." He establishes the relationship between Him and us as parent/child. It could have been different: He could have made it a king/subject relationship. In that case, the answer to the problem of evil might well be, "Evil happens because I'm the King, and I'm going to do what I'm going to do. Who are you to question me?" But God doesn't deal with you in terms of tyrannical power, but in terms of fatherly mercy. And as a merciful Father, He says, "I've made you My own child, and I take care of My kids. You don't have all the answers, but you can be sure that I'm working all things for your good. I'm telling you: trust Me."

Which leads us to the third point to keep in mind. While you don't know why bad things happen, you do know that God is merciful. You know it because you know the Gospel. You know God is merciful because He makes the Gospel crystal clear: He points you to the cross and says, "That's My Son, dying on the cross, in your place, receiving the due penalty for your sin. At the cross, you see me working for sure, and you don't have to wonder what's going on because I tell you." You can't know for sure what God is up to in what you see from day to day, in both good and bad. But you do know for sure that Christ has died for you. And if your heavenly Father has paid such a price to make you His own beloved child, He will not forsake you now. That you know, no matter what bad things happen. He will deliver you, because He is faithful and He is merciful.

There are some other times and places where you know exactly what God is up to, because He tells you once again. One is your baptism, where He made you His child. That's why you remember your baptism daily in the face of temptation and affliction, because it is your assurance that you are God's beloved child, that you have a merciful Father in heaven who will deliver you. Another place and time is Holy Absolution: for no matter what else is happening around you, the Lord declares, "I forgive you. You are Mine." Third, of course, is His Holy Supper: there you know that the Lord is present with His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. In the midst of all the bad and uncertainty of the world, you are not forsaken: the Lord comes to you to give you life.

That is what the Lord gives us as His answer to the problem of evil. That is why Jesus bids us to repent, lest we perish, in our Gospel lesson. Repentance is not some cruel exercise we must follow in order to grovel for some good at Jesus' feet. It is a gift of God to us. It is the Lord calling us from sin—and the death that sin brings—to grace and life in Him. When met with evil, sinners will be tempted to ask, "What have I done to deserve this?" and then grow

angry with God. But that is not for you. For you, the time to ask "What have I done to deserve this?" is when you are confronted with God's grace in Christ. What have you done to deserve this? The answer then, of course, is nothing. You don't deserve it at all. But your heavenly Father delights to give it to you because Christ has died to redeem you.

Undeserving sinners that we are, what Good News it is to hear the Lord say, "You are forgiven for all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen