

**Isaiah 55:1-9  
I Cor. 10:1-13  
Luke 13:1-9**

**March 7, 2010  
Bakersfield, CA,**

## **Suffering, Sin, and Good Fruit**

### **Where Does Suffering Come From?**

Since Old Testament times people have been pointing fingers at the sufferer. The idea was that if someone suffered, it meant they had done something wrong and were being punished. The book of Job is all about that and asks how can a righteous man suffer? We look at our own experiences and at what we observe in other people and we too wonder whether there is a correlation between suffering and specific sins – or at least specific habits and lifestyles. It is not too difficult to make the connection between certain behaviors that can damage our health and cause suffering. You can probably name quite a few. But what about suffering and tragedy that has no apparent connection to the victim's behavior or lifestyle? We ponder this when we are relatively healthy and when we are ill. Where does suffering come from?

These days not many people believe that suffering is punishment from God for wrongdoing; although you would be surprised how many think this when tragedy strikes them or their family – what did we do to deserve this? Actually, more people today are upset with God when anything untoward befalls them. They expect God, or life, to protect them from all tragedy and suffering; as though life should always be safe and free of troubles; and if not then God is to blame.

Several years ago, a reporter for the BBC named Jeremy Vine conducted a survey in which he and his associates asked over 10,000 people in various parts of the world certain questions about religious faith. One of the questions in the BBC survey was: "Does suffering in the world make it harder for you to believe in God?"

As he began to tabulate the results, Mr. Vine found something that surprised him to no end. When he asked that question in Britain, he discovered that large portions of the population said yes, the reality of human suffering is an obstacle to faith. But when he asked the same question in Lagos, Nigeria, or Delhi, India -- chronically poor and overpopulated places where life is short and difficult, and people are literally dying in the streets -- a very different answer came back. Comparatively few people in those poverty-stricken places said that suffering in the world made it harder for them to have faith.<sup>1</sup>

In Luke 13, Jesus answers a question that everyone struggles with. Are disasters God's way of punishing us for our sin?

**Suffering and tragedy can happen to all.**

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<sup>1</sup>“From Pulpit to Pew for March 7, 2010, *Sermon Suite Subscriptions*, sermonsuite.com

**Jesus commented on two stories that were current news in his day. The first story is about the outrageous behavior of a tyrant, Pilate, who's troops killed some Jewish worshipers. (There is no mention of this outside the Gospel, but it is certainly in keeping with what we know of Pilate.) The second story is about a construction accident; a tower being built fell over killing some workers, an unfortunate but not uncommon event. The widely held explanation of these tragedies, among the people of Jesus' time, was that those unfortunates suffered or died because of their sins. But Jesus rejects this explanation out of hand. "No!" he says. Don't use God by saying he punished these sinners, in order to explain a tragedy. Suffering and tragedy can happen to all. We're all guilty in God's sight; duh! So you too need to repent, open your eyes, and experience God's presence around you. Without sincere repentance, all will perish.**

**The majority of us give little thought to God or our relationship to Him in our daily or weekly living. That's why we need the weekly reminder of Sunday worship to turn to our Maker. Lent has traditionally been the season for Christians to focus on repentance – so we're at a good point to do so. It is a healthy practice to confess our sins; to admit we've fallen short of God's expectations for us; that we don't always (or often) listen for God's input in our living and decision making. Repentance means turning away from all that so we can face God again. It starts with our failings and culminates with God's grace. Long ago the prophet Isaiah said it, ". . . everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! . . . Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and you labor for that which does not satisfy?" Good question. Why do we spend our money and time on things that do not bring lasting happiness? Why is it so difficult to make time for the things that build a life: like developing virtue and Christian character, wisdom, family relations? Why is it so hard to recognize our need for God?... We need to come here to acknowledge *what* we want to turn away from and *who* we want to turn toward.**

**I recall way back when communism dominated half of Europe, and then its demise beginning in 1989. Shortly afterwards Joanna Poznanska, professor of economics at Seattle Pacific University, wrote, "Communism literally 'demoralized' society . . . communism destroyed the work ethic, and deprived people of human freedom and accountability to God - thus running counter to the Christian understanding of humankind's nature and destiny. . . . In the end, the communist dream to build a world without God became a nightmare. The collapse of [communism] . . . wasn't an economic failure as much as a moral victory."**

**Economist and Nobel Prize laureate F. M. Hayek had earlier said something similar, "Systems which undermine religion and family are doomed to fail, and communism was no exception."**

**If it turns out we aren't much different than a communist or any other nonbeliever, in our relation to God, then we, as individuals, as a church, or even as a nation are headed for big trouble. Look around you. What is happening in our country that undermines religion and family in the media, in government, in education, in our own lifestyles?**

**The need to turn to God is constant, for temptation is also. We seem prone to avoiding the Kingdom of God while we try to make our own kingdoms. It is tempting to worship something other than the One who made us and gives us a second chance. Yet St. Paul said, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." Others have temptations every bit as great as any you and I face. Deliverance from suffering and temptation are gifts that God provides for all who will endure throughout these "last days." Paul urges believers to remember the spiritual as well as physical food and drink that God provided in times past. All the more so will God provide for us now by means of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who overcomes our suffering. Help comes from God, beyond our own means, in mystical union with God in Christ.**

**Mary Poplin, professor of education and Dean of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University, attended a Methodist church as a child, but began searching other spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, even telepathic attempts to bend spoons. She began teaching at Claremont, where a Christian friend encouraged her spiritual journey. Eventually in 1993, she became a Christian.**

**Her journey took several weeks. When she looked at Jesus, she knew He was the Son of God and she began to read her Bible every day. But she hadn't made a personal commitment to Him. Then in January 1993, she visited her mother's church in North Carolina. In her own words she said how it happened: "When we got there, I was really moved to just go up to the altar and give my life to the Lord. It wasn't even an altar call. It was a communion call. The guy said, you don't have to be a member of any church to take communion. You just have to believe that Jesus Christ lived, that he died for your sins, and you have to want him in your life. And when he said that, I was so powerfully moved that I actually thought, even if a tornado rips through this building, I'm going to get that communion.**

**I took the communion, and I didn't even listen to the guy. I knelt down and said, 'Please come and get me. Please come and get me. Please come and get me.' And when I took the communion and I said that, I felt free. I felt like tons of things had been lifted off of me. And I began to have an insatiable desire to read the Bible."<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid

**To worship in spirit and truth; that's what brings us into communion with the living God, through Jesus His son. [Each time we share in holy communion we proclaim our faith in our God who saves us from all our foibles and failures and lifts the burden of suffering from us, and our faith that Christ will return and fulfill the promised kingdom of God.]**

**God is patient – wanting all to bear the good fruit of repentance.**

**Jesus follows up his comments on those two tragedies with a story about a fig tree. A man planted a fig tree and for three years it bore no fruit. In frustration, the farmer wanted to cut it down and plant a tree that would bear fruit. The gardener shook his head. "No," he told the farmer, "give the tree one more year. Dig around it and give it manure. If it still does not bear fruit, cut it down." It seems to be a parable about Israel or Jerusalem, and maybe today we could call it a parable about the church and us. Judgment *and* salvation are lifted up, both of which come from God. God is ready to destroy the tree because it does not bear fruit (i.e. it is faithless), yet also wants to save it. We are expected to be doing more than merely occupying space in the yard. If we suffer being uprooted and destroyed, it is because we have not been fruitful in the vineyard. Yet God wants to give us another chance, offering grace and mercy. Grace is an undeserved gift bestowed. Mercy is deserved punishment withheld.**

**These are some of the most hopeful words in the gospel. All of us live with the frustration of things that do not work as we wish. Children and even adults do foolish things. Churches strike off on what seems to be a destructive path; after trying and trying many of us are ready to give up on someone, something, or even ourselves. This gospel refuses to give up. Let us put down Christ's words by any hard thing in our lives. "Give it one more year," he says. It should be a mantra for the church everywhere. One more year!**

**God is coming and invites us to accept his offer of grace. The invitation is offered now, right here among church people and anyone who wishes to hear. You know who you are; and God knows who you could be.**

**God is patient – wanting all to bear the good fruit of repentance. That is why you and I are in worship this morning. We want to leave our sins behind so we can *leave here* with the promise that Christ will be with us, offering us a new chance at life and *strength* to resist temptation. That will be our salvation.**