**Is God Punishing You?**

**By Jeff McDowell**

3-23-25

3rd Lent, A

I Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

**Sermon Theme:** *The why* of suffering is echoed all throughout time and across the globe. So many of us ask “why” when bad things happen to us. It seems that circumstances are controlled by God, who can do all things. But is God really controlling all things? If that is true, why did Jesus have to suffer and die? Today’s passage from Luke 13 addresses the problem of suffering head-on. Jesus is asked if people from Galilee who suffered a cruel death under Pontius Pilate were especially guilty. Jesus responds with an overall perspective of life, death and suffering. He seemed to say that we are all in the same boat, sinners who must repent to gain entrance to the kingdom. St. Paul gives a wonderful thought that we are often tested in this world, but that God will not let us be tested beyond our strength! Are you suffering? Pray, get right with God, and endure the tests before you. God is not punishing you personally, and God will help you get through it.

**I Corinthians 10:1-13**

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, **2**and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, **3**and all ate the same spiritual food, **4**and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. **5**Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. **6**Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. **7**Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.’ **8**We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. **9**We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. **10**And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. **11**These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. **12**So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. **13**No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

**Luke 13:1-9**

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. **2**He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? **3**No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. **4**Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? **5**No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’ **6**Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. **7**So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” **8**He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. **9**If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’

**[Sermon Start]**

It could have ended in tragedy, but for the grace of God. I was out on my first solo drive in my mother’s white Plymouth Duster. I decided to go out into the countryside, taking the route I had used to bicycle when I just wanted to get away, and part of it was a gravel road. Excited to be driving alone for the first time at age 17, I hit the gas hard, then realized that made me closer to the stop sign much quicker. Putting the brakes on normally would stop me in time, except that I forgot you cannot stop so fast on gravel. I skidded right past the stop sign and into the intersection, praying, screaming, hoping no one was coming from the other road. And no one was. I was saved from destruction that day. I thanked God and made a decision not to do that again. I would be much more careful. Did God save me? Was it all a game of chance? Was I any more important to God than the family that was in a crash that month, someplace else?

To those who were not saved from a crash, was God punishing them for sin? (I DON’T THINK SO.)

For me, who lived to tell about Not being in a crash, was God rewarding me for being great? (I DON’T THINK SO.)

Today’s readings may help us better understand the mysteries of “Why.”

First, I want to recap last week’s sermon on finding peace.

 In the midst of rampant ***fear and anxiety,*** and our nation (and our world) is currently intensely nervous, we can find peace when we realize that most of our **fear is:**

**F**alse

**E**xpectations

**A**ppearing

**R**eal

Gaining a sense of ***Peace is a Christian trait*** and a gift we can achieve if we truly apply it. Like anything else in life which has value, this takes some focus and a commitment to work for it.

Phil. 4

***6****Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.****7****And* ***the peace of God****, which surpasses all understanding,* ***will guard your hearts and your minds*** *in Christ Jesus.* ***9****Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and* ***the God of peace*** *will be with you.*

Pause / Pray

Exhale / Exalt

Assess / Align

Cross out Fear

Exude Peace to others

Today I want to use the scriptures of the day to get us closer to understanding the suffering we experience and **the nagging question of “Why?”** At a time of pain, of suffering, of fears, of conflict we often ask “**why?”** Especially, in the face of death we have heard it a thousand times: **“Why God, Why Me? Why This? Why Now?”** Did you notice that both Paul and Jesus answer that question in today’s readings? If not, I encourage you to follow along with me and re-read these this week. Paul writes to the Corinthian church, filled with new believers who have come out of pagan religions. And Jesus speaks to the question posed to him about some Galileans who suffered and died at the hands of Pontius Pilate, something he would soon experience himself!

Seriously, if I could easily and simply answer the question of suffering *in the next 15 minutes* for you, I would stand as a genius; and you, as a very studious crowd. But thanks be to God, subjects like these are explained in and throughout the Bible. We have access to the written word of God on a daily basis: there is nothing keeping us from knowing the mind of God about things like this if we simply read it and know it deep in our hearts.

***2****Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart*. Hebrews 2:12 (see entire chapter for context of God speaking to Israel.)

Here, the word of God is not referring to the bible as we now have it; but the act of God speaking to a nation (Israel), and us now being able to read it in and through the bible. To know God’s intentions, we must know what God has said before; because **we are not the first people to suffer and ask, “Why?”**

CS Lewis, Christian writer wrote a book called the Problem of Pain. *“The truth is that at the heart of God’s love is a suffering Messiah and followers who take up crosses and follow in like fashion.”* I highly recommend this book of Lewis, as well as A Grief Observed where he chronicles his own struggle with God at the death of his wife. These are not easy reads, but will take a lot of patience and brain power to get through. But they are worth it.

In Luke 13, people around Jesus question him about “why” God had allowed such atrocities as this: Pilate (Roman Governor) siphoned money away from the Jewish temple treasury for an aqueduct project that he personally longed to complete. This aqueduct was to convey water from a spring, some 30 miles away from Jerusalem, directly into the city. Understandably, the Jews took exception to funding Pilate's pet project with their temple donations.

When Pilate came to Jerusalem to supervise the festivals, he was greeted by huge demonstrations of angry Jewish subjects. Pilate disguised his personal troops and sent them into the crowds to kill the Jewish ringleaders and greatest troublemakers. It’s possible that it was as a result of that same aqueduct project that the "tower of Siloam," which possibly perched on Jerusalem's city walls, collapsed, killing all those standing near.

So Jesus cites this tragedy to ask, *“Do you think those who were killed due to Pilate’s project were more evil than any one else?* (He implies, NO.) But Jesus indicates that everyone will die a cruel death unless they repent (walk the other day) from sin! In other words, evil, suffering and even death is in the world equally for all people. You cannot take one incident of death and say that person is being punished by God!

Lk. 13:4 *“…those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?****5****No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’*

Sin is what God punishes all people for, and salvation from sin and death is what God freely gives through Jesus Christ!

What is sin? Paul describes common sins, which he calls “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5.

***9****Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery,fornication, uncleanness, lewdness,****20****idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies,****21****envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.* ***22****But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,****23****gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.*

Listen, Jesus said do not judge that you be not judged, right? But that means to judge is decide the mind of God toward an individual. We are not the judge of someone else’s standing with God.

 (romans 9:14)***14****What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!****15****For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.”*

So, God is the only judge of person’s eternal soul. But **we are to judge things.**

**Matthew 7 RIGHT AFTER “JUDGE NOT.” *15****‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.****16****You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?****17****In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.****18****A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.****19****Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.****20****Thus you will know them by their fruits.”* ***21****‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

We can see actions, words, heart attitudes which are sinful and not of God. We are to judge actions. We are to know right from wrong. It is not all up in the air. Your truth is not different than my truth, contrary to popular opinion. Truth is truth. Right is right and wrong is wrong. And how do we know what is right? **God’s word.** The ten commandments are not open to interpretation or subject to change! The bible must be read carefully to know the mind of God. The Spirit of God must be present to true believers to judge the things of the world.

Now, to Paul in today’s reading from I Corinthians, Paul has a rocky relationship with that church. He has to correct them repeatedly, because their pagan religions have influenced them in their now Christian church relating. Here is what he tells them, after citing Old Testament history about Moses and the golden calf incidents, where the people turned to worship idols, complained about God’s leadership, and engaged in sinful sexual practices. He says, that God took their lives when they sinned. Then paul gets to his point: ***12****So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. (PRIDE IN SELF)****13****No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. (SUFFERING IS COMMON, NOT INDIVIDUAL TESTING) God is faithful (MAIN FOCUS), and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength (A PRIMARY CHRISTIAN BELIEF), but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” (A PRIMARY CHRISTIAN HOPE, AND A PLACE FOR TESTIMONY)*

FINALLY, in dealing with this question of suffering and the role of God, Jesus goes right to a parable (story he makes up) to make an important point of God’s patience, God’s common sense with us and God’s timeline for mercy and grace! (Wow, that is a lot right there!)

***6****Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.****7****So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?”****8****He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it.****9****If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’*

**There is mercy, there is grace, but God’s patience with our lack of fruitfulness is not forever; Turn to God.**

Jesus intervened when God the Father would give us up. Jesus bought extra time and hope for us. But we need to respond to the year of grace, turn around from sin and bear fruit for God.

*“Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,****23****gentleness, and self-control.” (gal. 5)*

***5 “****I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (Jn. 15)*

Hebrews 12:

***3****Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.****4****In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.****5****And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—*

*‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
    or lose heart when you are punished by him;****6****for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
    and chastises every child whom he accepts.’*

***7****Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?*

***11****Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

***12****Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,****13****and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*

*The why* of suffering is echoed all throughout time and across the globe. But is God really controlling all things? God is not punishing you personally; God does ultimately punish sin with death; Use this time of testing to get right with God and endure the trouble before you. God’s grace will help you get through it.

Benediction: ***May the strength of God pilot us. May the power of God preserve us. May the wisdom of God instruct us. May the hand of God protect us. May the way of God direct us. May the shield of God defend us.***
\_St. Patrick (389-461)