

The Question of Suffering (Luke 13:1-17)



1. When we share our Christian faith with someone we sometimes get challenged on the subject of suffering. Why do some good people suffer so much while some bad people seem to breeze through life and die in comfort? The real question in people's hearts often is not so much if some people deserve to suffer or not, or if God permits it or not, but how it fits in with the picture of the good almighty God who is in control of our universe.
2. Jesus deals with these questions today. The three incidents recorded here reveal three different sources from which suffering can originate and how we are to respond in each situation.

Suffering can originate from (1) human source, (2) divine source, and (3) satanic source. If suffering comes from God, then appropriate action is to accept it, submit to it, and use it for God's glory. If suffering comes from the devil, we need to fight back by faith in Jesus' name. If they come from human beings, then we should seek to correct the persons responsible for it.

But if we blame all suffering on the devil, then we will be confused why not all problems are solved by faith in Jesus' name. If we take it as all coming from human beings, we will be frustrated because even after putting many things right, we will find not much has changed and suffering continues. If we take all suffering as coming directly from God, then we are left with the impossible conclusion that God cannot be good, He enjoys hurting people.

A. Human Origin

And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things?' (13:2)

1. Human beings have a morbid interest in hearing about disasters and misfortunes of other people. We enjoy reading crime thrillers with sinister murder plots or watching disaster movies - so long as they are other people's stories and not our own.

People weren't much different in Jesus' days. Some people brought to Jesus' attention particularly gruesome news on how some Galileans were killed by Pilate, the Roman governor. The incident may refer to the Jewish insurrection that arose against Herod's 'aqueduct project'. Herod wanted to improve the water supply to Jerusalem by building an elaborate water pipeline that will reach into the city from outside. But he ran out of money, and he 'borrowed' from the temple treasury to fund this project. The hot-tempered Galileans reacted to his 'theft' by organising mass protests, and Pilate responded by stationing undercover Roman soldiers among the crowd to disperse them. But things went out of control and the soldiers ended up bludgeoning some Galilean protesters to death. The horror of mixing their blood with the sacrifices was probably aimed at teaching the hotblooded northerners an object lesson.
2. Remember Jesus had just warned them about the judgment that fell on the unfaithful servant in Luke 12? (C.f. 12:46). They were asking, did Pilate's slaughter of the Galileans belong to that category of judgment? If so, did these Galileans receive such a 'punishment' because they were bad Jews and deserved it?

In Hollywood movies, evil people often come to a horrible end in poetic justice. We assume tragic death is deserved by particularly evil people, whereas peaceful death is deserved by good souls. But does life really work out this way? If so, were these Galileans' gruesome and untimely death God's judgment on their outstanding sinfulness? Note the emphasis on the 'Galileans', who were from the north of Israel.
3. Jesus responds by reminding them of another tragic news of deaths from the south, i.e. Jerusalem where the scribes and Pharisees come from. *What about the recent disaster at the Siloam Tower? When the tower fell suddenly and crushed eighteen people to death without any warning? In the very religious centre of Israel! Have these people also done something so bad that they deserved such a terrible end?* Modern examples may be fatal car accidents and shocking airplane crashes, etc.

Question: When a sudden tragedy or disaster strikes, does that mean the people caught up in it deserved it? Did they suffer because they were bad people?

'I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.' (13:3)

Jesus answers His own question with an emphatic 'no'.

4. Those who suffer tragedy due to the human factor are NO worse sinners than anyone else. Therefore, those who do not suffer such misfortunes are NO better than them. Because ALL deserve it. Note Jesus' emphasis on ALL, occurring 4 times in the short verses, v2-5. The death sentence was compounded on the entire human race ever since Adam's fall. Some of us just have been so far spared and not received YET what we deserve. And none of us can wail, 'What have I done to deserve such misfortune?' because all of us deserve it.
5. This should change the Christian attitude to suffering – from entitlement to gratitude. The world says when ill health or calamity strikes, 'What have these innocent people do to deserve this?' But we say, 'I've had these good years by the mercy of God even though I don't deserve it.' Have I lived an outstandingly upright and faultless life, so I deserve to enjoy success, health, and happiness? No, I have sinned, and I deserve God's judgment, but instead God has shown me His mercy.

Jesus shows us the right way to respond to the two tragedies, the Galilean massacre and the Siloam tower disaster. We too deserve to be in them, but we have been spared so far and unless we repent, we too will come to a catastrophic end like them. Every one of us will face our own end sooner or later. Those on whom the Siloam tower fell - they got theirs earlier. But ours too is surely coming. It is not a matter of 'if', but 'when'.

6. But the good news is, there is a way out. Only one way to escape the disastrous end. Turn AWAY from our sins and turn TO God in repentance. *'unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.'* Our first reaction at each tragic news headline we read, funerals we attend, or airplane crashes we hear of - should be to ask ourselves, 'Am I ready? Have I truly escaped my own disaster?' Jesus didn't say, 'unless you believe,' but 'unless you repent.' It means we acknowledge our sins and forsake them and come to God humbly. And if possible, make restitution.

Our second reaction should be to ask, 'Did they have an opportunity to repent and to get right with God?' There will be no more chance to do so after death. Jesus tells us, when we hear tragic news, make it personal. He uses the word 'you' 8 times in 4 short verses, i.e. stop talking about 'them', and think about 'yourself'. 'It is by God's mercy that we are here today, but our day of reckoning is coming.' That day will be a day of great blessing if we are prepared for it, or the day of destruction and disaster if we are not. *'Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies - so the living should take this to heart.'* (Eccl 7:2)

B. Divine Origin

1. Now Jesus turns to another kind of suffering, that which comes from God. These are not man-made disasters, but one caused by God's displeasure. God does bring judgment on evil in this world. Where is Sodom today? It lies buried deep south of the Dead Sea because God rained down fire from heaven as a judgment on their sins. Their disaster was not man-made, nor did it originate from Satan.

The parable of the vineyard would have made a lot of sense to the farmers. The vineyard's soil must well prepared and rich in nutrients to produce good grapes and quality wine. Commercially speaking figs were cheaper, so planting a fig tree among the vines meant commercial sacrifice for the vineyard owner. The fig tree is taller and larger, so it limited the number of vines in the vineyard. Its big foliage cast shadows on the vines and took their sunlight and soaked up the nutrients from the soil. It takes about three years for a fig tree to mature, so the owner gave it sufficient time to grow. But at the end of the three years, the owner did not get one single fig from the tree. So, he decided to cut it down and let the rich soil and the sunlight go to vines.

2. The fig tree is the picture of Israel. The owner of the vineyard is God. God took Israel out of Egypt and planted her in the rich soil of the promised land. He helped Israel grow in every way possible. But after centuries of patient care, God couldn't find any fruit He was looking for. So, He said, 'I am going to cut it down. It is just taking up valuable space without producing any fruit.' Then the gardener pleaded with the owner to give it just one more year before chopping it down. The gardener is Jesus, the Intercessor. The owner agrees, and Israel was given 40 more years to bear fruit. Then in 70AD Jerusalem was literally razed to the ground, and its inhabitants were killed. And the city was laid waste for 1900 years until Israel's rebirth in the recent history.

Question: What is the fruit God is looking for in my life and in my church? Am I producing the fruit God is looking for? Am I growing closer to Christ and becoming like Him? Am I touching somebody in His love?

3. This is a sober reality. If someone just soaks up all the rich spiritual nutrients year after year, but does not bear the fruit God is looking for, then God is fully justified in removing him from His vineyard, and giving the valuable room he has been taking up and the precious resources he has been wasting, to someone else who will bear fruit. God has a timeline for His people to bear fruit, and He can remove any minister, elder, member, church, or ministry if they do not bring forth fruit. He can do it in a thousand different ways. We should not be complacent. It is possible to have lots of foliage to show off, but actually bear no fruit. There is an appointed time to bear fruit. After that comes judgment. The right response when we are faced with God's impending judgment, is to repent and bear the fruit of our repentance. (C.f. Gal 5:22-24; John 15:1-8)

C. Satanic Origin

1. Since leaving Galilee, Jesus ministered in the open fields, at meal tables and in the marketplace, etc. because the custodians of synagogues, i.e. the Pharisees and scribes, were now openly hostile. Jesus just denounced them in shocking terms in Luke 12. So why is Jesus in a synagogue again? Because He knew there was a woman there in desperate need. This woman suffered from a demon which caused her back to be bent over permanently. Her spine was probably fused in *spondylitis deformans*. It must have been a terrible sight for the synagogue members, watching her painful struggle every Sabbath for the past 18 years.

'Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity,' Jesus right away addressed the cause of her suffering (13:12) and laid His hands on her, and her back straightened immediately and completely. For the first time in 18 years, she could look up. Needless to say, she erupted in praise to God.

2. This took the religious elites' hostility to the next level. The leader of the synagogue doesn't address Jesus directly, but the crowd with indignation. 'There are six days to be healed, but not on the Sabbath.' (13:16) This is the hypocrisy of religion and the religious man. This woman came to his synagogue for 18 long years in that horrendous condition. And the leader of the synagogue was angry because she was healed on the Sabbath?

What was his theological reasoning? Judaism allowed medical intervention on a Sabbath, only in life-threatening cases. The woman's condition not life-threatening. After all she had been in the same condition for 18 years. Couldn't she wait one more day?

3. *Jesus replied, 'Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So, ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound - think of it - for eighteen years, be loosed from his bond on the Sabbath?'* (13:15-16)

The law of Moses prohibited work on Sabbaths not only on the people but also on the animals (C.f. Deut 5:13-14). But people untied their animals on Sabbaths and led them to the trough to drink, so they don't get thirsty.

Jesus draws the comparison between the daughter of Abraham and the animal. She was bound by Satan for 18 years in deep physical and psychological pain. The animal was bound by a rope just for a few hours in thirst. If they were allowed to free their animals on the Sabbath so that they could freely drink water, then how much more was it right to free this woman of their own Jewish flesh and blood, to drink of God's mercy on the Sabbath day? They were treating their animals more humanely than their own people! This religious leader's mind was more bent out of shape than the woman's back! And the tragedy is, his mind never got straightened out while the woman's back was straightened.

This is the last time Jesus was seen in a synagogue.

How about our generation today? We cry, 'Save the whale! Save the trees! At all cost!' But we mercilessly kill human babies in their mothers' womb. This is hypocrisy on another level.

4. In summation, what do we do with man-made disasters? We personalise it. Am I right with God? Am I ready for my day of reckoning? Am I grateful to God for all His mercies given to me?

What do we do with divine displeasure? Repent, submit to God, and bear the fruit God is looking for.

What do we do with Satanic oppression? Submit to God and resist the devil by faith in Jesus' name. Pray for those who are oppressed and set them free in Jesus' name.

Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. Just as the people were divided into two groups after Jesus' confrontation - some who were ashamed and others who rejoiced - so also, we will be on that day of reckoning.