



## ASermon 09 - Bad Things Happen to all People Sermon

### "BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO ALL PEOPLE"

The Third Sunday in Lent &ndash; February 26, 1989  
Stephen Elkins-Williams

*Do you think that these Galileans [whom Pilate executed] were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered thus? ... Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No.*

The prevalent religious belief at the time of Jesus was that God punished sin and rewarded virtue in this life. Backed up by numerous passages from scripture, the Jews believed that the blind, the lame, the injured, or the diseased were reaping their just deserts for sin, either their own or their ancestors (Exodus 20:5; Leviticus 21:18-23). Jesus' own disciples, for example, asked him about the man born blind, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?" (John 9:2)

There was (and is) abundant teaching from scripture to support this view. In Job, for instance, we read, "Who that was innocent ever perished?" (4:7) Amos says of God, "Does evil befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?" (3:6) Isaiah quotes God as saying, "I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord, who do all these things" (45:7). And the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy spells out this general theory of immediate reward or punishment in graphic detail:

*If you obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command you this day, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you... Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your breasts, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock... The Lord will cause all your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you ... ' The Lord will open to you his good treasury the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands....*

*But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading trough. Cursed shall be the fruit of your of your body, and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out... The Lord will smite you with consumption, and with fever, inflammation, and fiery heat, and with drought, and with blasting, and with mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish.*

Of course not all of the Old Testament held this same view. Psalm 103, for example, which we recited together this morning, says:

*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,(  
slow to anger and of great kindness.*

*He will not always accuse us,(  
nor will he keep his anger forever.*

*He has not dealt with us according to our sins,(  
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.*

Jesus' own teaching, and perhaps more importantly his life, reinforce this second view. He consistently

proclaimed that the amount of suffering in one's life was not directly connected to one's sinfulness. God "makes his sun rise on the evil and the good," he said, "and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). In a parable he described two houses, one built on rock and the other on sand, representing a wise and a foolish life. Each bore adversity differently, but each had the same adversity to bear: "The rains fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house" (Matthew 7:25). In response to his disciples' question about the man born blind, Jesus replied, "It is not that this man or his parents have sinned" (John 9:3).

In today's Gospel Jesus made it even more explicit. The ones who were executed by Pilate and who died in the construction accident were no worse sinners than anyone else. There was no necessary connection between their suffering and their deservedness.

Jesus' words were reinforced by his life, or perhaps we should say, by his death. Although he was like us in all things but sin, and therefore undeserving of any punishment, Jesus suffered an ignominious death on a cross. This was the great scandal to many Jews of that time: If God had truly been with Jesus, they reasoned, God would not have abandoned him to such a death. He must have been a sinner, and not the Messiah. But the truth, proclaimed both in the teaching and the life and death of Jesus is that the suffering in our lives is not a measure of our sinfulness. God does not deal with us "according to our sins, nor reward us according to our wickedness,"

The applications of this truth for today are many. While most of us would not consider the passengers of the jumbo jet that exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, nor the people that died in the earthquakes in Nicaragua or in Armenia as being punished for their sins, still we may at least unconsciously regard the plight of the poor, the hungry, and the unemployed as being their just recompense. We may too easily think that the victims of rape or incest deserved their fate, as indeed, tragically, many of them are inclined to believe. We may, along with many supposedly religious leaders, declare that AIDS is God's punishment on homosexuals. But in doing so, we deny the truth of the Word of God as expressed in today's Gospel and as manifested in the person of Jesus Christ.

That is not to say that there are no consequences for our sins. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), both in this life and in the life to come. While we cannot attribute all suffering to sin, still our sin does lead to suffering. "Unless you repent," Jesus goes on to say in today's Gospel, "you will all likewise perish," Sin brings death, not only in regard to the next life, but even now in this one. As we sow, so shall we reap. If we pursue a life of self-indulgence, we will 'enjoy' shallow, unhappy lives. If we nurse our anger and resentment, we will become bitter people. If we choose a life of infidelity, to ourselves or to another, we risk the loss of our very souls. "For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption." (Galatians 6:8).

God's word to us this morning, then, is this: Do not judge others or yourselves by the amount of suffering endured. That has no necessary connection to one's sinfulness. All, however, are in need of repentance. Rather than continuing to choose death, turn back to God and choose life.

While we cannot change our lives on our own, we can with the help of a patient God, who like the vinedresser spoken of at the end of today's Gospel, is willing to take more time and to give us special attention to help us bear fruit. Let us again pray in the words of today's Collect:

*Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Christ our Lord. AMEN.*

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18(  
Luke 13:31-35