

“WHERE IS GOD WHEN... PART #2:
CAR WRECKS, CANCER AND HIV”

(Lamentations 3:22-25, 31-33; Romans 8:28)

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[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) Series Intro Video; (#2) “Zulu” Video Clip]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 1-18-09]

-I-

1. **[BOTH Services:]** Read Texts (NRSV): Lamentations 3:22-25, 31-33; Romans 8:28 and Pray.

2. **[WATCH SERIES VIDEO INTRO (Time: 0:20) – end on this week’s sermon background slide]**

A–We’re in the midst of a set of sermons in which we’re wrestling with the question of why a loving and powerful God would allow tragedy, suffering, and evil in our world.

B–And though our goal is not to have it all figured out in six short weeks, my hope is that in our time together, we can come to a better understanding of how God *really* works, and be directed towards some tools that’ll help us make better sense when bad things happen.

3. Today our focus turns to where God is when we face SICKNESS AND ACCIDENTS, and as we did last week, I want to start by asking the question **“Does God really CAUSE things like that?”** (e.g., manipulating our world so that people get sick and have tragic accidents?) ¹

A–Well, let’s first acknowledge that the unspoken assumption behind this way of thinking is that God somehow *needs* us to be sick or have accidents in order to fulfill some “secret plan/purpose” that He has – & many of us buy into this view without ever questioning it.

1–So, for example, when I was living in Virginia, at the funeral of an 8-year old boy tragically killed when his grandfather’s gun accidentally went off during a hunting trip, I overheard a well-intentioned person trying to consol the family by saying, *“It was just God’s will; He needed the boy in heaven, so God came down and took him.”* ²

2–Now, I have not doubt that God *does* in fact have a plan and purpose for our world, and a purpose for each of our lives. But I somehow have a hard time believing that any *good* plan would include a little boy being shot to death in a hunting accident.

3–Or what about those of us who know better occasionally thinking that our cold, our flu, our cancer (or that of our loved one) is some form of *divine discipline* – that God is either punishing us for something we or they have done, or is at least using it to “teach us a lesson” of some sort? ³

4–Or for that matter, what about misguided Christians who over the years have claimed that HIV/AIDS is God’s “judgment” on the homosexual community?

B–Now friends, I have no doubt that some of our *own* sexual and other health practices contribute to the illnesses and disease that we experience in today’s world, but I have a hard time believing that the God of the Bible would intentionally “smite” people with illness as a form of discipline. ⁴

1–I mean, think about this: ...If I told you that my daughter Jennifer was acting up and doing things she wasn't supposed to do, and that I was going to inject her with cancer cells so that she could "learn her lesson," ...what would you do?

2–You'd probably call DFACS (Dept. of Family & Children's Services) & have me arrested for child abuse! And yet, we're perfectly willing to believe that *GOD* does that?!

3–My point is that if we as *imperfect* human parents don't operate in this way with *our own* children, then why would we think that a *loving, perfect* God would act this way towards *any* of us as *His* children? ⁵

4–And isn't that exactly what Verse 33 of the Lamentations scripture says?...that "[God] does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone."

C–So No. I don't believe for a minute that God is up in heaven intentionally *causing* illness, disease, or accidents, either to discipline us, to teach us things, or even because they're a "necessary part" of some "greater plan."

–II–

4. But *if God doesn't cause sickness and accidents, then from where do they come?* Well, I want to suggest that there's a *scientific* response (which answers *HOW*), and a *theological* response (which answers *WHY*) – and that God is at work in *both*.

A–For example, science tells us that sickness and disease happen essentially when our human body malfunctions – when "good" cells go "bad." ⁶

1–In fact, given that our body is made up of billions of cells, all of which must constantly reproduce themselves *exactly* in order for us to be healthy, the amazing thing is that sickness doesn't happen more often than it does!

2–And remember, too, our bodies weren't intended to last forever – like a car, we can do preventative maintenance, take it in for a regular checkups, and occasionally even bring it in for major work, but eventually it'll wear out, and we'll die.

B–And as to the nature of how accidents occur, most of the time the answer is... "*Just because...*"

1–For example, sometimes equipment malfunctions.

2–Sometimes machinery gets overworked and breaks.

3–Sometimes we find ourselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

4–And in each of these situations, people can get hurt... and the best explanation we can give is the one expressed in this video clip from the movie "Zulu"...

[WATCH VIDEO CLIP from "Zulu" (Time: 0:30; DVD Index: 1:16:00-1:16:30)– where young British private, upon seeing the hordes of Zulu warriors arrayed against them, asks his Color Sergeant, "Why? Why us?" To which the Color Sergeant replies, "Because we're here, lad. Nobody else. Just us."]

5. Now, as people of faith, of course, we also believe that there's a *theological* response to sickness and accidents that addresses the question "WHY?"

A—Remember that the scriptures say (in Genesis 1) that when God created the world, He called it "*good*", which originally meant "*perfect; flawless; without fault.*"

1—But the scriptures also tells us (in Genesis 2) that when Adam & Eve sinned and caused what we call the "Fall" of humanity, the created order "fell" with them – meaning that though the earth was still "*good*," it was no longer "*perfect.*" ⁷

2—And just as God didn't go back and remake Adam and Eve to eliminate their *personal* and *individual* imperfections, so God likewise chose NOT to go back and remake the Fallen created order, either.

B—And what this explanation means, then, is that sickness and accidents are *not* part of God's *original* intention or design for *any* of us, but instead are simply the consequence of us as "fallen" human beings living in a "fallen," imperfect world – where our frail, physical bodies are going to be prone to "fallen" things like disease, illness, accidents, & death. ⁸

–III–

6. So then, if God doesn't *cause* sickness and accidents as a form of discipline or part of some "larger plan," but instead they're merely the result of human beings living in a "fallen" creation, then ***what does God do in the face of these things?***

A—Well, first let's acknowledge that the answer we talked about last week – that God is *with us* in the midst of tragedy and suffering – is also equally appropriate today. ⁹

B—And yet, let me also suggest two further answers that build on that original one:

7. First, today's scriptures indicate that **God REDEEMS our suffering** – the word means "*to offset the bad effect of; to make worthwhile; to change for the better.*" ¹⁰

A—And in fact, this is exactly what the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote today's scripture in Romans 8:28, "*All things work together for good for those who love God.*"

1—Now notice that it *doesn't* say that "*all things are good,*" but merely that "*all things work together for good...*" ¹¹

2—And Verse 25 of the Lamentations scripture says that "*The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him....*"

B—In other words, when we allow (& even "wait") for Him to do so, God can take the tragic, awful experiences of our lives & use them to bring about something "*good*" & beautiful. ¹²

C—A few years ago, a popular praise chorus expressed it this way: "*Something beautiful, something good; All my confusion He understood. All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife, but He made something beautiful of my life*" ¹³ – God *redeems* our suffering.

8. And yet, a further thing that God does when sickness and accidents strike is that **He gives us HOPE** – hope for the *future*, as well as hope for *today*.

A–The hope for the *future* comes from the fact that Jesus said that he goes to prepare a place for us when we die – a place where there’ll be no more sickness or suffering or pain, because we’ll be living with God in heaven where those things don’t exist.¹⁴

B–And hope for *today* comes from the fact that God promises to be with us and sustain us through whatever we have to face – as Verse 24 of the Lamentations 3 scripture says, “‘*The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him.*’”¹⁵

C–[STORY OF HORATIO SPAFFORD]

Some of you may know the true story of Horatio Spafford, a Christian lawyer from Chicago, who in November 1873 placed his wife & four children on a ship sailing from New York to France, planning to join them 3-4 weeks. The trip started out fine, but about halfway across the Atlantic, the ship struck another vessel, and sank within 15 minutes, with the loss of nearly all on board.

Hearing about the tragedy back in America, Spafford waited anxiously for news of his family, and at last, after a ship had rescued a few survivors, he received a short telegram from his wife Anna that simply said, “*Saved. Alone.*”

Spafford immediately booked passage on another ship to Europe, and when they reached the spot where his family’s ship had gone down, as he watched the waves roll over the watery graves of his four daughters, Spafford took out a pen and wrote down words that have become an enduring song of hope:...

*“When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea-billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.*

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate, And hath shed His own blood for my soul. ...*

*And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend, ‘Even so’ – it is well with my soul.*

*It is well with my soul. It is well, it is well with my soul.”*¹⁶

–IV–

9. You see, friends, just as He did with Horatio Spafford, God can **REDEEM** our suffering and give us **HOPE** even in the midst of tragic things like accidents, sickness, and disease.
10. So whatever suffering you’re facing, whatever “tunnel” you’re in, today I invite you to open your heart and let God of redemption, hope and healing bring you His light.
11. [PRAY]
12. [CLOSING SONG: Hymn #377, “It Is Well With My Soul”]

ENDNOTES:

1. This is our typical first response when someone gets sick: to get angry with God. Even “non-religious” people (who say they don’t believe in God) often become sort of “religious” in these situations, using the sickness or accident to accuse the “God” they don’t believe exists for this bad thing that’s happened.

2. Like this person, many people of faith often jump too quickly to give easy, pat answers “off the cuff” to people walking through tragedy and suffering. And when we do this, it often does more harm than good, even when we offer them with the best of intentions. More often, it’s better simply to offer our own sorrow and presence to them, rather than some “neat, tidy” theological statements that oversimplify life’s tragedies.

3. This was the view that was prevalent in Bible times, however. For example, in the Old Testament book of Job, many of Job’s friends kept telling him that his present suffering must be the result of some sin that he had committed. The majority of the book itself, however, is written to dispel this notion that sickness/disease is always the result of someone’s sin. Now, do I believe that God disciplines us when we do wrong? Yes. Do I believe that sometimes my own actions have consequences that even God chooses not to nullify? Yes. But do I believe that God smites us with disease? No. Do I believe He *causes* our sicknesses in order to “teach us a lesson”? No. Still, do I also believe that out of those experiences, God can bring good things to pass? For sure!

Still another related and misunderstood statement often heard today is when people refer to their own sickness/illness as their “cross to bear” – a phrase taken from Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, and Luke 9:23. A careful reading of those passages, however, will reveal that a Christians’ “cross” is something that they have a conscious *choice* over – something they must voluntarily *choose* to take upon themselves as a sacrifice for the sake of God’s kingdom. And since sickness and accidents *cannot* be voluntarily chosen, they CANNOT be a “cross to bear” in the sense that Jesus means.

4. It’s true that the Bible does seem to contain examples of this: God giving people illness or even death as a “punishment” for some “sin” they committed. But my question is: since the Bible was written by flawed humans *about* God, could it be that these stories merely illustrate the human tendency to *blame God* for things that are *not* really *caused* by God?

5. I’ve heard it said that “*God at His very worst is infinitely kinder and more gentle and compassionate than we are at our very best*” [Rev. Adam Hamilton, in “*Sickness, Suffering, and the Silence of God*” in sermon series Where Was God When... (January 14, 2001)]. This is why I see nothing consistent with the character of Jesus Christ in a God that actually *causes* sickness or accidents (Read Luke 12:24 as a description of the extent of God’s love and justice).

6. For example, each of our bodies contains millions of strands of DNA “code” that reproduce throughout our life, and give us our unique personality. But occasionally, a strand mutates and forms unhealthy cells called “tumors,” and if left alone, they can reproduce in something that poisons the rest of the body that we call “cancer.”

7. Thus, our world is one that still contains *potential* for perfection (which the Bible promises for the future), but which at present is still infused with *imperfection* (Read Romans 8:19-21). In other words, the “Fall” of humanity into sin had effects on everything, including the universe we inhabit. Everything in Creation is subject to “frustration” and “decay.” In this line of reasoning, corporate Sin is therefore ultimate cause of personal death, disease, and suffering. And we today are therefore the recipients of this fallen, imperfect state of creation – which is still *mostly* good, but nevertheless still occasionally *harmful*.

8. We live in a world where there are germs, bacteria, and disease. But our bodies are not perfect. They’re weren’t planned to be immune from those things, but some of those things keep us alive. Our bodies were planned to be obsolete at some point – all of us are going to die; that was part of God’s plan. The only question is when. So, as Christians we don’t believe that sickness or accidents are a part of God’s will (in fact they’re *contrary* to God’s will). But God tolerates them in the same way that God tolerates sin; because

he knows that someday it's going to disappear. In fact, today's first scriptures talks about this in generic terms: "*The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.... For he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone*" (Verses 30 & 33).

It should also be pointed out that as Christians we believe that some illness and accidents are the result of the spiritual attack(s) of evil (i.e., from "Satan", "demons," etc). Biblical examples of this include Matthew 17:14-18 and Luke 13:10-16. Yet even here, we believe that God can take and use even these attacks and fold them into His perfect will.

9. That answer is true for natural disasters that we discussed last week; it's true for sickness and accidents that we're discussing today; and we'll also find it to be equally true for the many instances human evil and violence that we'll discuss next week.

10. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, "*redeem*" at www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/redeem.

11. Note, however, that this is not just for anyone, but "*...for those who love God...*" (i.e., who have trusted Him as their Savior and Lord) – meaning that it's only when we have a personal faith in God through Christ that we are able to see how God can work good out of very bad situations.

12. The cross of Jesus is the ultimate example of this – using the suffering and death of his son Jesus to save all of humanity. Another example from the Old Testament is found in the story of Joseph, and how at the end of his ordeal, he said to his brothers (who had sold him into slavery when he was younger), "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives*" (Genesis 50:20). Other modern examples include the fact that as unwanted and tragic as they are, natural disasters cause millions of people to reevaluate the priorities of their life: hundreds of millions of dollars in aid is sent to help alleviate people's suffering who would probably not have done so without the tragedy; and Christian ministries have the opportunity to help, minister, counsel, pray, and lead people to saving faith in Christ. In these cases, God can and does bring great good out of terrible tragedy by "*forcing evil to serve God's purposes*" (Rev. Adam Hamilton). He takes all of the suffering and evil of our world and folds it into His own divine purposes. God doesn't *cause* them, but does fold them into his purpose, making something beautiful out of it.

13. Christian Praise Chorus "*Something Beautiful, Something Good,*" in The United Methodist Hymnal #394. In other words, things like sickness & accidents can either make us better or bitter: they can prompt us to draw closer to God; or they also cause us to push God away – the choice is ours.

14. Consider the words of John 14:1-3, which are often read at funerals. And after one of his own best friends died, Jesus spoke some of his most famous words from John 11 (also heard at funerals), "*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die*" (John 11:15-26. Read the rest of the story in John 11:1-43). So, the bottom line is that God doesn't promise us in the Bible that He's going to make us all better in this life. He doesn't promise us that He'll exempt us from sickness just because we're believers, or that we'll never experience sickness or pain while here on earth. In fact, even the ultimate of suffering – death – can be an act of God's goodness, in that it allows us to be healed by the Master and live with him without pain or suffering anymore. Consider the fact that though there are approximately 106 deaths per minute in the world, the Bible says that not even one sparrow falls to the ground forgotten, without God's knowledge or notice (Read Matthew 10:29-31 and Luke 12:6-7; and Luke 12:24). This means that even our deaths have meaning in God's eyes.

15. Read also 2 Corinthians 12:10, Romans 14:8, and 1 Peter 4:12-13 & 19.

16. Story cited in James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988), pp. 243-244. Lyrics by Horatio Spafford, found in The United Methodist Hymnal, "It is Well With My Soul," #377.