

“WHERE IS GOD WHEN... PART #3:

9-11 AND THE HOLOCAUST”

(Matthew 2:16-18; Psalm 42:1-11)

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[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) Series Intro Video; (#2) JL Alvarenga Video Testimony; (#3) “I Know” Drama]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 1-25-09]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Psalm 42:1-11 (Resp. Reading UMH #777) and Matt. 2:16-18. 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 series 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 today our focus turns to the many examples of human violence and evil found throughout history: ...

1–Roman Emperor Nero’s reign of terror;

2–The brutality of 19<sup>th</sup>-cent. American slavery;

3–The slaughter of over 6 million Jews by the Nazis during World War II;

4–The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing;

5–School shootings over the last decade at Columbine, PA Amish country, & VA Tech;

6–And of course the Al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, ...and so on.<sup>1</sup>

3. And unfortunately, the examples don’t stop at the things we see in the news. No, they occasionally strike personally, as well, ...

A–...As in the case of one of our church members who struggled with faith as a result of the violence and evil that he experienced firsthand as a young boy – listen to his story...

B–[WATCH JL ALVARENGA VIDEO TESTIMONY, Part 1 (Questions 1 & 2):

*Q1: “Tell us some of your story dealing firsthand with human violence”; Q2: “How did these experiences affect your understanding and view of God and Christian faith?” (Time, 2:27)]*

C–Wow!...we’ll come back to his story later. But first let’s acknowledge that though most of us haven’t experienced the kind of *intense* violence that J.L. did, many of us *do* know family members, friends, or even workmates who (like him) have turned their backs on God and walked away from faith because of the suffering that they’ve seen either in the world or in their own lives.<sup>2</sup>

4. Now of course, we all know that this kind of thing is not new, either. Even back in Bible times, people were perpetrating evil against one another.

A–In today’s Psalm 42 scripture, the author laments God’s seeming absence in the face of violence when he says to God in Verses 9-10, “*Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me? With a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’*”

B—And today’s scripture from Matthew 2 is another example...

**[Contemporary Service ONLY: Read Matthew 2:16-18,**

*“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”]*

**[Both Services:]** Here we have an angry, vindictive king (Herod), jealous of a potential usurper, ordering the mass murder of children – what kind of sick, paranoid mind is that?!

C—And yet, we humans have done these kinds of horrible things to each other for thousands and thousands of years.

5. Now, I hope it’s safe to *assume* that most of us know better than to think that God is in heaven somewhere *prompting* the hearts of people to commit acts of violence against others – hopefully we know that that’s NOT how God works.

–II–

6. But the question then becomes, “**WHY DOES GOD ALLOW IT?**” e.g., If He’s truly good and all-powerful, then why doesn’t God step in and intervene to *prevent* things like murder, rape, 9-11, the Holocaust, the Columbine shootings, or even the war in El Salvador?

A—Well, to answer this, let’s go back to the opening story of Adam & Eve in the Bible: Have you ever wondered why the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was put right in the middle of the Garden of Eden? <sup>3</sup>

1—You know, I’ve heard people use this fact to say that *God Himself* is really to blame for the existence of evil our the world – because He put it there!

2—And yet, was the tree placed there so that Adam & Eve would be tempted to eat it? OR was it placed there as a sign of God’s *trust* that humanity *wouldn’t* eat it?

3—In other words, perhaps the tree in that story is merely a symbol of free will – a reminder that we humans are not created to be *robots*, but *free moral agents*; creatures to whom God gives the freedom to *choose* right from wrong. <sup>4</sup>

B—Yet, since God gives us freedom of will – which is a *wonderful* thing when we use it to follow God and do good – it also means that sometimes people *choose* to misuse that freedom by doing awful things to others.

C—And when whole cultures and nations of people participate in this misuse (or at least do nothing to stop it) then terrible things can happen – like American slavery, or the Holocaust, <sup>5</sup> or September 11<sup>th</sup>.

D–In fact, every one of us in this room has at one time or another misused that freedom, resulting in *us* hurting ourselves and/or others (even if unintentional).

1–And when we multiply that times a whole world of nearly 7 billion people, with even just a fraction of those misusing their God-given freedom at any given point, we have a recipe for all kinds of evil happening. <sup>6</sup>

2–And in many instances, the question is not so much “*Why does GOD allow human violence and evil?*” but instead, “*Why do WE allow it as much as much as we do? And why are WE sometimes the ones either perpetrating it, or standing by and doing nothing about it?*” <sup>7</sup>

7. You see, it’s not God’s will, or desire, or plan that human violence and evil occur.

A–But as much as God hates and detests it, He reluctantly *allows* it because He refuses to take away our human free will. <sup>8</sup>

B–Let’s watch a short skit that explains this a little better...

**[DRAMA/SKIT: “*I Know*”(Time, 3:00)]**

–III–

8. So, if human violence and evil is the result of our God-given *freedom* to make choices (even when such choices result in harm), then what does *God* do in the face of such things?

A–What is *God’s* part in response to human violence and evil? <sup>9</sup>

B–Again, I suggest that the answers we gave over the last two weeks also apply today: (#1) *God walks with us*; (#2) *redeems* our suffering; and (#3) gives us *hope*.

9. But to build on these, let me suggest one more: ...that when we allow Him to do so, **GOD GUIDES US INTO A BETTER WAY: THE WAY OF LOVE.**

A–In the Bible, Jesus says, “*Love one another as I have loved you*” (John 13:34), and to “*Love your enemies, [and] do good*” (Luke 6:35). <sup>10</sup>

B–In other words, God sent us Jesus not only to *teach* but also to *show* us a concrete example of how we’re supposed to treat one another – he demonstrated for us *the way of love*.

C–Think about it for a minute: how much suffering would be relieved in the world today if all people would simply live a life of love as Jesus taught?

1–There’d be no more war, or murder, or famine because people wouldn’t be coveting that which they didn’t have, or hoarding that which they did.

2–There’d be no more people cheating on their spouses, or being dishonest with each other, or putting each other down, because that’s not the way of love.

D–And this is precisely why movements like that of Mohatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. have been so successful – because they demonstrate that the power of *love* in action can overcome even the power of human violence and evil.

1–Friends, the only effective response to the violence and evil of our world is love.

2–Jesus is the one who best illustrates it, and as his followers, you and are called to not only *live* a life of love, but to challenge and call others to do so, as well.

–IV–

10. So given all we’ve shared, whatever happened to J.L.? Well, let’s listen to the rest of his story:..  
**[WATCH JL ALVARENGA VIDEO TESTIMONY, Part 2 (Questions 3 & 4):**  
**Q3 “What happened to change your mind and heart?” Q4 “What advice would you give to**  
**someone who struggles like you did?” (Time, 3:02)]**
12. Friends, in the midst of the “tunnel” of human violence and evil, God gave J.L. a “door” of faith, hope, and community... and he took it. My prayer today (and God’s desire) is that we’ll choose to take it, as well.
13. [PRAY]
14. [HYMN: #534, “Be Still, My Soul”]

#### **ENDNOTES:**

1. Details: Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of the Alfred P. Murray Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April 1995, killing 168; the Columbine School shooting was in Littleton, CO in April 1999, killing 15 students and teachers, and injuring 24 more; the September 11<sup>th</sup> event included attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, NY, the Pentagon, and a crashed airplane in Pennsylvania; the execution-style killing of Amish school children took place in Paradise, PA in October 2006 (5 girls were killed and 6 others wounded); the Virginia Tech massacre took place in April 2007, leaving 33 dead and 15 wounded.
2. Because of this, in one of his books Langdon Gilkey wrote, “*The reality of evil in our world is the greatest intellectual threat to the convincing power of Christian theology.*” [Rev. Adam Hamilton, in “*Why Does God Disappoint Us?*” in sermon series Where Was God When... (January 7, 2001)].
3. Genesis 2:9 and Genesis 3:1-3.
4. So, God has taken great risk in giving human beings the freedom to *choose* right over wrong, good over evil, Him over the devil and the things of this world.
5. To many, the Holocaust caused by Hitler in the 1930s and 40s was the greatest threat to many people’s intellectual approach to the faith in the last century. After the holocaust, many Jews walked away and said they didn’t want any part of God anymore. When you go to Europe today, the cathedrals are half empty because the people of that generation could not reconcile the problem of evil that they saw firsthand with the goodness of God. So what do we do with Hilter? Couldn’t God have just bumped off this one man?  
 Yet, if we take human free will seriously (as God does), then we have an interesting dilemma: Hitler was just one man – by himself incapable of killing 6 million Jews. So we know that he also had many followers, not all of which held his “cooky” values ideas, but at least his programs put bread on the table,

and so they supported him. The result is that he is elected to office by thousands of German voters, who were then unable to get him out of office once he was there. Thousands more were then willing to carry out his sick plans for the holocaust, and millions more who would work for him (or at least not against him). How many people, then, did it really take to put to death 6 million Jews? Estimates are about 3 million people: those who actively participated; as well as those who did *nothing* but watch as their neighbors were hauled off in railway cars.

So the question becomes: where does God stop in taking away freedom from us as human beings? Does he stop by knocking off the *one* man (Hitler)? Or would he have also had to knock off the 3 million? Or more? And if God did *that*, then wouldn't that make Him just as much a mass murderer as Hitler himself? Of course, there *was* a time in history that God did this very thing – the story of Noah and the flood in Genesis 6-8, destroying all humanity. But God's heart was so broken over that event that He promised never to do it again (and the rainbow is a sign of that promise).

6. One way of describing this is that evil is partially caused by the fact that we as human beings are bound-together (inter-related) to one another – what *we* do affects others. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "*I cannot be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you cannot be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be*" [Martin Luther King, Jr. "*Beyond Vietnam*," an address delivered to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, at Riverside Church, 4 April 1967 New York City, cited in The Upper Room devotional guide January 19, 2009]. In science, a similar concept is found in quantum physics, which says that one cannot observe an environment without changing it – what *we* do affects others, so if we can offer love, that can be passed on to others, as well (Read Margaret Wheatley, The New Science).

7. For example, all while the Nazis were making their rise to power, where were the German and European churches and national leaders? It's true that a small few tried to stand firm against the tide of evil in their midst (including churchmen like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German industrialist Oskar Schindler, and Corrie ten Boom). But most church and government leaders acquiesced to or appeased the Nazi Party and remained silent while the Jews were slaughtered. Edmund Burke is often quoted as saying, "*All that is necessary for evil to triumph in the world is for enough good men to do nothing.*" So the question in this instance is not "*Why did God allow the Holocaust?*" but "*Why did WE?*"

8. As one website put it, "*God gives mankind freedom of choice. We can choose to follow Him and take a stand for righteousness, or we can rebel against Him and pursue evil. The problem resides in the heart of [humanity]. 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?'*" (Jeremiah 17:9). *Until [humanity's] heart turns to God, the world will continue to witness "ethnic cleansings," genocides, and atrocities such as the Holocaust*" [From [www.gotquestions.org/God-allow-Holocaust.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/God-allow-Holocaust.html)].

Likewise, in his book Where Is God?, Sam Althaus chronicles his eye witness experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust. He asked that question while he was confined to the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Now, however, he now understands that the atrocities of that time were committed by evil people who were exercising their God-given free will to choose evil behavior.

9. Although time does not permit to expound on it in today's sermon, first of all I think God is outraged when we treat His good gift of free will with such levity and indifference. At times I think He must want to wring His hands in disgust and say "*What are these creatures of mine doing to each other? How long must I put up with this nonsense?*" And so, He sends the prophets and priests of the Old Testament, but since we ignored them, He finally sends His own son, only to have him killed by the world's violence, too (through his execution on a cross). Yet, even through all of this, he refuses to take away human freedom.

10. Also read Matthew 3:43-47 and 1 John 4:7-21.