



“Can I Be A Christian If . . . 3. I Don’t Believe God Gives People Troubles?”

Text: Luke 13:2, 3-5a

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“One summer afternoon a country preacher went to visit a farmer in his congregation. As the preacher and farmer sipped iced tea and talked, the father’s son bolted into the house, carrying a dead cat by the tail. In his excitement, the boy did not notice the preacher sitting on the other side of the room. He rushed up to his father, held up the dead cat, and said, “Dad! I found this stray in the barn. I hit with him a board, then I threw him against the barn, then I kicked him, and then I stomped him.” At that moment, the boy saw the preacher. Without missing a beat, the boy concluded, ‘And then, Pastor, the Lord called him home.’”¹

We can chuckle at that. We know of times when people do the darndest things and then, when the chickens come home to roost, blame God for the peril in which they find themselves. I remember talking with a ministerial colleague, who told me of visiting one of his parishioners in the hospital. The man he visited was morbidly obese, smoked like a chimney, and was known to put his liver under considerable strain from time to time. There he was, in a hospital bed, connected to machines, with tubes coming and going from his body, recovering from a heart attack and stroke, and he looked at his pastor and said, “Why is this happening to me?” I asked my friend what he said. He told me that he first wanted to shake him and say, “what did you expect?” But, what he said to the man was, “Sometimes life isn’t fair.”

I remember visiting a little boy – just 7 years old – fighting leukemia. The chemotherapy had done its job of robbing him of his hair and leaving him weak and tired. He decided he would collect hats to wear until his hair grew back and he had quite a collection. His parents nearly buckled under the strain of caring for a very sick child. “Why is God putting us through this?” they asked me. I assured them that God had nothing to do with their son’s illness – an illness from which he eventually recovered.

What are we to make of suffering and sickness and disasters and tragedies? Does God give people troubles? Does God inflict a time of trial on people, in order to get their attention, or to pay them back for something they have done? Does God use pain and hardship and illness and death as instruments of retribution and reckoning? Are we to believe that God gives people trouble?

Some, in the Christian family, say “yes.” Some, in the Christian family, believe that God uses sickness and hard times and natural disasters and even death to enforce the divine mandates. Some, faithful Christian people, say that God has a mean streak and we better not frustrate God, or we’ll reap the whirlwind.

One example of this kind of behavior occurred, shortly after September 11, 2001. Several days after the tragedy, one religious leader, a well-known television preacher, claimed that the 9/11 attacks was God’s retribution for America’s sins. He proclaimed that abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians, and the ACLU had so angered God that God used the terrorists to punish America. Years earlier, the same preacher, told his audiences that God created AIDS to punish homosexuals. By the way, that preacher has since died, and I will confess that I harbored a secret hope that his welcoming committee to heaven included Michelangelo, Gertrude Stein, and Liberace.

Another well-known television pastor blamed God for the 2010 earthquake that devastated the island nation of Haiti. The rationale behind this proclamation was that the people of Haiti had practiced voodoo from time to time and that the people made a “pact with the devil,” 200 years earlier during their revolution against France. So, this television preacher was saying that God sent an earthquake to decimate Haiti as a punishment for their past sins.

Now, you just have to wonder, how any Christian could possibly believe that God purposely caused or allowed the tragedy of 9/11. You have to wonder how any Christian could see God’s hand in the deaths of over 25 million people from HIV/AIDS. You have to really wonder how any Christian could see God’s hand in an earthquake that killed over 200,000 people in one of the most poverty-stricken nations on the earth. It does not help when the insurance agencies of the world still refer to earthquakes, tornados, tsunamis, cyclones, and floods as “acts of God.” But you have to really wonder what kind of self-respecting Christian would posit such poisonous patois.

The Bible gives us some significant direction when it comes to suffering and God’s role in it. In the scripture lesson we read from Luke, though we don’t know the details, it seems that some eighteen workers were killed in Jerusalem in what was an apparent construction accident. The people of Jesus’ day assumed that God had something to do with the accident and that God was punishing the workers for their sin.

Jesus immediately dismissed their viewpoint. “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? No, I tell you.” Jesus stated his view clearly: God didn’t cause that tragedy back then and if Jesus were here today he would most assuredly reassert that same position. God doesn’t cause tragedies. Period.

We read of another case where people sought to assign blame for a tragedy. A man born blind was brought before Jesus. Those who brought him posed the question: “who is responsible for this man’s blindness? Is he blind because of his own sin? Is he blind because of the sins of his parents?” Jesus immediately responded, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” (John 9:2) The tragedy of the man’s blindness was just that – a tragedy. No one’s sin had caused the blindness. He was simply blind.

The Bible reminds us that, as much as we would like God to make everything perfect for the good people and lousy for the bad people, it just doesn’t work that way. In the book of Ecclesiastes, we are reminded of an essential truth: “I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.” (Ecclesiastes 9:11) “Time and chance happen to us all.” We may wish that the world had more of a rhyme and reason than that, but it doesn’t. Sometimes life is harsh and cruel. Sometimes life is wondrous and lovely. “Time and chance happen to us all.”

The subject of suffering is a complex issue for Christian people. There are no easy answers. There are no simple solutions.

But, let us at least make this simple affirmation: God does not cause pain and suffering. God does not bring disease, hardship, disaster, and death to humankind. God is not the source of pain and anguish in our world.

“God is love,” the scriptures assure us, and no one acting in love could be the source of such calamity. The image of God that we see in Jesus is that of a caring, compassionate, and kindhearted God, not one that doles out cancer and tidal waves and earthquakes. The understanding of God that the Bible offers us is that of a God who wants what is best for us, who nourishes and sustains us, who accompanies us and comforts us in all of life’s circumstances.

The Psalmist had that insight into God. When writing what we know as the 23rd Psalm, the author – whoever that was – offers us an image of God as One who cares for us: making us to lie down in green pastures...spreading a table before us in the presence of our enemies...anointing us with the oils of gladness and healing. The image we have of God is one of companion: leading us beside still waters...guiding us along right pathways...traveling with us through the valley of the shadow of death. The image we have of God is one that casts out fear, bringing us every good thing, and offering goodness and mercy to all.

What that tells us is that God is not against us, but for us. God is with us – and that is the greatest good news in all of scripture. God is not the source of life’s troubles, God is our comfort and help through all of life’s troubles. God is there to strengthen us for the journey, wherever the journey may lead.

In that story of the man born blind, Jesus says that the man’s blindness is not the result of anyone’s sin, but is there as an opportunity for the glory and wonder of God’s to be revealed. Sometimes, when we are traveling through one of life’s tough patches, we catch glimpses of God in the love and caring coming from those around us. We are the recipients of acts of kindness and love. We receive the comforting and encouraging words of family and friends. We feel the presence of so many carrying us through the dark days.

During those times when we may be tempted to feel utterly alone – God is there, sometimes working directly, quite often working indirectly through other people, reminding us that we are never, ever, ever alone. God is with us – ever and always.

“Can I be a Christian if I don’t believe God gives people troubles?”
Absolutely. In fact, I hope you are such a Christian.

God does not bring us trouble. God does not bring us pain. God does not bring us sickness and death.

God brings us comfort, God brings us hope, God brings us peace, and God brings us life – for now and evermore. Amen.

1. Martin Thielen, *What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?*



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