

Bad Things
Luke 13:1-9
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Why do bad things happen?

Every time something bad happens to us – every time there's a tragedy in the world or in our lives, we want to know why. We want an explanation, we want to see the reasoning, the sequence of cause and effect that led us to this point, that created the trouble we find ourselves in. When there's an earthquake, or a hurricane, or a global pandemic, we want to know why. When there's a war, when a dictator sends his armies into a neighbouring country and bombs hospitals and maternity wards, when people suffer from cruelty and injustice, we want to know why. Why do bad things happen?

Of course, when we ask that question, we're really asking a different question. After all, most of the time, we know why a particular bad thing is happening. We can explain why earthquakes happen, how plate tectonics work, how the pieces of earth's crust floating on the mantle jostle and bump together and cause tremors. We can explain how pandemics happen, how viruses jump from one species to another, mutating to become more contagious and virulent. We can explain why wars happen, why one nation or one leader might decide that an invasion is the best way to gain power or

influence or resources. All these bad things that happen, most of the time we can explain why they happen, the mechanics involved in how that tragedy unfolds. So when we ask ourselves why bad things happen, the question we're really asking is, why doesn't God stop them? Why doesn't God stop the bad things from happening? If God knows everything about what's happening in the world, has a perfect understanding of the current status of every fault line, every virus, every political situation all around the world, and if God is all powerful, if God can do anything and everything imaginable in this world, then why doesn't God stop the bad things from happening before they happen? Why doesn't God reach down and seal up all the fault lines so the whole crust moves together in perfect harmony? Why doesn't God just snap two fingers together, and turn all the viruses on the planet into dust, along with a few politicians while we're at it? If God can do it, why not? Why let these bad things happen if you've got the power to stop them?

And this isn't a new question. People have been asking this right from the very beginning, right from the moment we first recognized that there was someone bigger and stronger in charge of the universe, that question of why the universe is still so full of trouble and pain and death keeps coming up again and again. We can see that question in our reading from the Gospel of Luke. Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, has just massacred a bunch of peaceful pilgrims from Galilee while they were worshipping in the temple, and people want to know why. The tower of

Siloam collapses, and eighteen people die under the rubble, and people want to know why. But you'll notice from that reading that the most popular answer that we've managed to come up with for our question, the answer that we keep coming back to again and again, is that bad things happen because they happen to bad people. Pilate's victims, the people killed in the tower's collapse, they must've had it coming, they must've done something to deserve it. That's a somewhat comforting explanation for all the trouble we see all around us – God lets it happen to us because it's our fault. And while that might seem like a strange answer to give for a tower collapse, if we're honest, we often give this same answer for the trouble in our own world. We like to believe that people are homeless because they did something wrong, that the poor and addicted are where they are because of their own bad choices, that if everyone just lost some weight or exercised more or followed these common sense health protocols, we wouldn't have to worry about cancer or covid or anything else. We don't worry about wars that happen on the other side of the planet, because we think that that's just kind of the way things are there. We like to believe that if you do bad things, somewhere along the line you'll get what's coming to you, because that gives us a nice neat explanation, a nice neat answer to the question of why bad things happen.

But when Jesus hears people giving this nice, neat answer to this age-old question, he isn't impressed. When he hears the gossip about how Pilate's victims must've secretly been embezzlers or adulterers or bad

tippers or they didn't use their turn signal when changing lanes, real evil scoundrels, Jesus shoots this explanation down. The Galileans who suffered were no worse than all the other Galileans. There was no connection between their behavior and the tragedy that befell them, no karmic justice that God allowed to unfold to give them what they deserve. Those who suffer are no better and no worse than anyone else. We can't explain away every tragedy, all the pain and suffering in the world, with a neat cause and effect explanation that puts it all on the shoulders of the suffering. And Jesus makes it perfectly clear why this explanation doesn't hold water – because everyone suffers. At some point, all of us, no matter how good we think we are, no matter how perfectly we think we've followed all the rules and procedures for a good life, at some point, we're all going to experience pain and tragedy and trouble in our lives, and all of those lives are going to end the same way. Sooner or later, we're all going to perish of something or other – there's no getting out of here alive. So trying to explain away suffering as the fault of the people who suffer will one day backfire on you – at some point, you will come face to face with trouble, and you'll be able to see all those pat answers and nice neat explanations for what they always were. Jesus makes it perfectly clear that bad things can't be explained as punishment for our sins. That isn't the answer to our question.

So what is the answer then? You'd think this would be the moment where Jesus tells us, once and for all, the real reason there's all this trouble in the world. But Jesus doesn't actually give an answer to the question – not

here, and not anywhere else. God doesn't answer 'why' questions – every time we try and pin things down with nice neat explanations, God isn't really interested in helping us out with clear answers that will put the whole system of right and wrong and good and bad firmly under our control. Jesus doesn't tell us why there's trouble, he doesn't tell us why bad things happen. Instead, he tells us what he's going to do about it. Take a look at that parable Jesus tells us about the fig tree. We never find out why this fig tree is a dud of a tree. There's no explanation given, no autopsy revealing that the real trouble is root rot, or aphids, or whatever. The gardener seems to have no idea why the tree isn't producing, and he can't offer any answers to the angry landowner who just wants the tree torn out and replaced. Instead, what the gardener tells the landowner, is not what's wrong with the tree, but what he's going to do to fix it. He's going to love the tree. He's going to care for it, nurse it back to health, pour all his energy and expertise, his care and his love into that suffering, struggling stumpy little tree. The gardener sees the tree suffering, and instead of trying to explain the suffering, he works to relieve it, to heal what is broken, to restore what has gone wrong. The gardener asks the landowner to give him a chance, give love a chance to work, to turn things around in the life of that tree, and that's Jesus' answer to suffering, to trouble in this world, even to death itself. Jesus calls to us to bring our lives to him, to bring our suffering, broken, troubled lives to him, all our pain, all our tragedy, all the withered, wizened old trees that take up space and never produce anything, Jesus calls

us to bring it all to him and give him a chance to grow love, to grow life, to grow something that will endure beyond this world, beyond this life, something that will grow into eternity. That's Jesus' answer to suffering and death – that God so loved this world he gave us his only son, so that those who believe in him will not perish, but will have everlasting life. The way out of our trouble, out of our pain, the way out of perishing, it isn't God stepping in and solving all our problems, removing every possible source of pain and trouble in the universe, explaining everything away with a perfectly rational solution. God's answer to suffering is incarnation – becoming one of us in Jesus Christ, sharing our pain, perishing on the cross for our sake, so that through our relationship with Jesus Christ, turning to God in faith and repentance, we don't have to fear the pain of this world any longer. We don't have to worry about the tragedies that will still come our way, because we know that God's love is still with us. God's grace is still all around us. God's strength still gives us the strength to endure. God never promises that we will live lives free from suffering; in Jesus Christ God joins us in our suffering, experiences that pain with us, and promises to never leave us or abandon us in our trouble, but to work in us and through us so that the trouble will not conquer us, the trouble will not win out over the power of God's unending love. The road to Jerusalem leads through the cross to the empty tomb – the journey of our lives leads through suffering to eternal life. That is God's promise to us, and to all who suffer – not that we will never suffer, never experience hunger and thirst, but that if you're

thirsty, come and drink, if you're hungry, come and eat your fill, come and listen to words of life, come and experience the love of God, come and give the gardener a chance to grow love in your life, so that even in the midst of the trouble, you will know the love and grace of Jesus Christ, today, and every day, until the kingdom comes. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!