



From the Pulpit

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"Is God Calling You?"

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." Luke 13:1-5

When we see the images of the earthquake, we are overcome with grief. There is untold sadness behind every panoramic image of an entire village obliterated, behind every scene of refugees struggling to find shelter or waiting in long lines for water, behind every picture of a makeshift hospital tent overflowing with crying children, and behind the eyes of every desperate relief worker.

Even before the earthquake the nation of Haiti was already filled with suffering. There are many places on earth that have human suffering so staggering that it chills our bones. But now the suffering in Haiti has become exponentially worse and the suffering people are in everyone's prayers.

We see this suffering and wonder what God is doing. How do we reconcile suffering of this magnitude with God? Why did this happen and how could God allow this to happen? I could not be a Christian if the Bible did not provide guidance about the nature of God in the face of suffering.

Psalm 107 offers guidance:

Some wandered in desert waste lands, finding no way to a city where they could settle.

They were hungry and thirsty,
and their lives ebbed away.

Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men,

for he satisfies the thirst and fills the hungry with good things.

The Psalm does not give answers to why or how. Suffering is an age old mystery that remains unsolved. When is it time for someone to meet their Maker...why does suffering happen.... We do not have definitive answers. The Psalm does mention God helping those in trouble. God cares about those who suffer. Remember how Jesus reacted when he received news of the death of his friend Lazarus? It is the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept." (John 11:35) Jesus was upset, agitated, and sad upon hearing news of the death of his friend. So we are left with no answer as to why people suffer, but we do know that God offers compassion, and we, as the children of God, are to do likewise.

Our New Testament Scripture from Luke 13 is about a moment when a crowd confronted Jesus with questions similar to the ones we face today. "There were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices."

The governor Pilate desecrated the temple and the people protested. He placed Roman signs of the image of Caesar throughout the city of Jerusalem, but when the people protested he moved the signs to Caesarea. When Pilate took money from the temple treasury to finance a new aqueduct building project the people protested again but this time he had no tolerance. Roman soldiers dressed in civilian clothes mingled with the protesting crowd and flashed their swords in a terrible massacre.

We do not know if the people asking Jesus about this massacre were family members, relatives, or friends of those killed. Jesus makes it clear that those people that were killed did not deserve it. God was not punishing them. Another headline of that time was the Tower of Siloam that fell and killed 18 innocent bystanders. Jesus answered, "Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem..." Jesus makes it clear that these people did not die because they were more evil than anyone else. There are many in the world, sadly, who are so self righteous that they would need to hear this point more than any other.

When the blind English poet John Milton was visited one day by Charles II, whose father the Puritans beheaded, Charles II said, "Your blindness is a

judgment from God for the part you took against my father.” Milton answered the king with a brilliant reply, “If I have lost my sight through God’s judgment, what can you say of your father who lost his head?”

So what do we make of what Jesus says: “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish.” Jesus seems to be saying, ask not why it was their time, but consider why it was not your time- this could have happened to any of you! So the question really is, are you ready, if your life were to end today in an earthquake, are you ready to meet God? Jesus wants the people to reflect as deeply upon their lives as they are upon the people who died in the tragedy.

God calls us to respond to the earthquake in Haiti as well. God is calling us to assess where we are going. Maybe we are heading toward a goal and we are going the wrong way. We have a tendency to identify a goal that we see as the end of our life’s fulfillment. It could be subconscious and we do not even realize it. It could be a job, a family situation, a certain brand of car, a conquest of some sort that we are moving towards with grave determination because that goal will finally bring fulfillment to our lives. When we reach the goal, maybe we recharge and identify another goal and blindly continue, or maybe we realize the utter despair that comes with the discovery that the goal is not worthy to be the end of life’s journey.

Let us realize that the end of our journey is not a job, a car, a house, a title, but God. God is the end of our journey in life. We are heading toward God – God is our life’s journey!

So along the way in life we face tragedy with first turning toward God. Psalm 18 is a beautiful prayer: “I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer; my God is my rock in whom I take refuge.”

Jesus called out to God from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Sometimes we feel forsaken by God, but eventually God brings us from darkness into the light. In 2 Samuel David calls out to God, “In my distress I call to the Lord!” David was being pursued by assassins and barely escaped. Sometimes in life we feel as if something is chasing us and we cannot escape. God offers freedom from this wild chase. God offers rest and peace.

When we turn to God we gain an eternal perspective. Our temporal situation is placed within an eternal framework. Eventually, even the most desperate cries to God may turn into prayers of thanksgiving for deliverance. This is found in so many Psalms- the move from bitter to better. Even the worst circumstances will end. Suffering will not last forever. There will be an end because God is our end, and with God we find peace. As Revelation 21 states, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Once we have called out to God, found comfort from God’s eternal promise of peace, then we are strengthened to react properly. An example of this is found in

2nd Corinthians chapter 1. The Corinthians had asked Paul how they were supposed to deal with the fact that Roman soldiers were taking their friends and family and throwing them to the lions. Paul responds beautifully that we should praise God, the Father of Jesus, "the Father of compassion and the God of comfort, who comforts all of us in our trouble..." Paul states that comfort from God generates a type of energy within that pours out. God comforts us in all our troubles "so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."

When God comforts us we are able to comfort another. God knows what it is like to feel the pain of this life, and God cares about the pain of his children. When we choose to turn to God, remembering that suffering does not have the final say, and become empowered with compassion to help another, we can reach out to others with the power of God. We become instruments of God's peace- the arms of God, the body of Christ. No matter how many questions perplex us, we must see the final goal in life- God. With God as our final destination, let us hear him calling, "Keep the faith, stay the course, keep praying, keep hoping, keep helping..." Amen.