

Welcome to our new sermon series titled, “Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People?” I would like to offer to you a different title, or a subtitle, if you will, simply the word, “Why?” Why does God allow bad things to happen - or, as some believe, why does God cause bad things to happen? Or maybe we could call this sermon series – “Where?” or “Where is God when these things happen?”

This sermon series will try to help us all work through some of the questions we have in our lives concerning disease, natural disasters, bad luck and bad people.

This sermon series may challenge some of the thoughts or beliefs we have carried since childhood. Some of you may disagree with some of the thoughts I share, and that’s okay.

My goal of this series is that, as thinking people, how do we answer the questions we have about the nature of God? I invite us all to open our minds up to theology that we might not have grown up with or might not have ever thought about when it comes to God’s nature.

Over the next couple of weeks we will look at a few of the major concepts and beliefs that many of you here may have, and maybe some concepts nobody here has ever been exposed to. My goal isn’t to lecture you on what I believe God’s true nature is, but instead I hope that we all can grow in our understanding of God and form our own beliefs about his nature.

This week we will look at God from the standpoint – “Does He punish us, or cause things to happen because of our sin?”

Next week we will discuss if there is some master plan – some kind of pre-destined road map that controls our lives. We'll also discuss who is in control of this world – is it God, is it Satan, or are we out here on our own – alone? We will look a little more at natural disasters, poverty, starvation, and disease.

I would also invite everyone to read the book of Job over the next week. It is a book I will be referencing from time to time, and reading it will help you get a little more insight into this series.

45 years ago, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. started off a famous speech by saying the following, “5 score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon - light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.”

He went on to say, “But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.”

The great American that he referenced was Abraham Lincoln who was gunned down in April 1865. And Martin Luther King Jr., who said those words, was gunned down April 1968 – 40 years ago.

Senseless acts of murder. We shake our heads and wonder, Why? Especially when we look at what they were both fighting for, equality of mankind. Neither one wanted war, neither one wanted people to die; they both just wanted humans to be treated like humans. Was God punishing them for something? Where was God when these things happened?

I would like to think that both of these men made changes in our society. I would like to think both of these men did not die in vain. 40 years after Martin Luther King, segregation pretty much doesn't exist, and we've had African Americans in important positions: Secretary of State, Judges on the Supreme Court, Head of the Joint Chief's of Staff, and now we have an African American as a serious contender for President of the United States.

Did Martin Luther King's dream come true? At face value, I would probably say yes. But then yesterday in the Kansas City newspaper, I read an article that said 40% of the nation's African American males are unemployed. I was shocked. I thought those days were past. What happened to King's dream? Where is God in a world that still has unemployment, racism, and injustice?

Then in the same newspaper, I read about a Marine Corp corporal who raped a beautiful young woman, then because she was going to testify against him, killed her and buried her in his back yard. I ask myself, who was God punishing by the young woman's death?

Then, as if that wasn't enough, I read about a man in Hawaii that took a 2 year old child – a completely innocent little toddler, and threw him off an overpass onto an expressway. Did that boy do something so bad that he needed to be put to death?

Here in Marana I heard about a driver that ran into the back of a bus and then hit some kids with his car. Did those small children commit such a grievous sin that God punished them? I don't think so.

Sometimes I wonder, are we living in bad dream?

Then natural disasters come to mind: Katrina, Andrew, the San Francisco Earthquake, the tsunami, wild fires, tornados in the Midwest, and the list goes on.

Then what about disease? There is a statistic that every single adult American knows someone who has cancer. That is a staggering statistic.

Sometimes, when I start thinking about all of these things, I begin to wonder, where is God? We say we have a loving and gracious God, but if that was true, why doesn't he do something? Why doesn't he help us? Why do innocent people have to get hurt or die? Why do bad things happen to relatively good people?

That's the question isn't it? Why do bad things happen to good people? I mean if we heard that the man in Hawaii that tossed the child onto the expressway – if we heard he got hit by a car when he was leaving the scene, would we feel pity or would some of us say, "Good, he got what he deserved - an Eye for an Eye"?

But when we think of a cute little 2 year old child – we think of innocence – what could he have done to have deserved that? We might be able to understand something bad happening to a bad person, but it can be hard for us to understand a good person being hurt.

Then our mind could shift and we can think about the Jews during WW II. How about the people in the twin towers on 9/11? Then we can think about the countless others who were murdered for one reason or another. So, if God wasn't punishing them, that brings up another question, where was God when this happened?

As 21st Century Humans, it seems that we have this need to have a concrete answer to this question. We need to put it in black and white – no gray areas allowed.

I don't know if I will be giving any profound concrete answers, but I will be talking about several different things that make us struggle with our faith and our understanding of God.

The first area I want to address is: "Why do we hurt each other?" Why doesn't God intervene and prevent people from hurting other people? We constantly hear and read about these issues. And it makes us wonder, how can God let this happen?

Take Hitler, for example; how could God allow him to murder so many people? How could a loving God allow a man and his followers to murder millions and millions of people? How could a gracious God allow Hitler to be so evil and cause that much suffering to so many people?

Whenever I ask that question I have to ask an even harder question, one that we might not like the answer to: "What is God's alternative?" What is the alternative to a world where we are given the freedom to choose – where we can choose to do evil to someone else and have them pay the consequences?

The alternative to that kind of world - is a world where we have no choices at all. Where we only can do the right thing and we can never do the wrong thing. It would be a world where we would virtually be moral robots. That's what the world would be like where there is no possibility that we could hurt someone else.

God made us different from the animals roaming the world. Animals are driven by instinct, they can't tell the difference from right and wrong. We are more than that. The Bible tells us that God created us in His image. That means we have the capacity to choose our own destiny.

We have the ability to bless or curse others with our own hands, our hearts and our minds. The ability to do good to others or to harm others – what a tremendous responsibility that is. We have free will and the power to exercise that any way we choose.

But God didn't leave us alone to figure it out on our own. God said, "Here is how I want you to live. Here is how you should exercise your freedom."

But we have the choice to pursue what he has laid out for us or reject it. When we embrace it, we end up blessing others and ourselves. However if we choose to reject it, evil things can happen and we can destroy others. We have the freedom to choose to do good or evil to someone else and it is up to us how we exercise that choice.

God doesn't long for someone to kill another person. God doesn't want a person like Hitler to come into power and influence other people. God didn't intend for the other senseless killings we hear about. God never wanted any of this. Although there are tremendous consequences to our decisions, God longs for us to be free.

And we need to think about this for a minute – would I rather be a moral robot – a moral slave - not able to make any decisions for myself? Or would I rather be free?

The consequences, the flip side, or the cost to that freedom is that sometimes, people take advantage of that freedom, and do evil to others. The scriptures tell us that God wants us to treat each other well, to love each other – but when we don't God weeps with us.

As thinking people, we have to realize that there are certain laws and rules that God himself has put into place that can't be changed. Like the laws of nature. Gravity is a fact, the earth orbiting the sun is a fact, and free will is a fact. If God were to change any of these, it would be the end of the universe as we know it.

I don't want to say that God is not all powerful, but there are certain things that we must realize – as thinking people. God simply cannot change the basic principles that he himself has put into motion since the beginning of time.

So God can't simply take away our free will from time to time, as this is already something he has given us – something we've had since the beginning of time.

Something else I want to address today is the belief that God punishes us for something we did using our free will. There is an Iranian proverb that says, "If you see a blind man by the side of the road, kick him; why should you be kinder than God?"

In the Book of Job we read how Job has this beautiful life – God has really blessed him. He has tons of sheep, lots of kids, lots of land – just a wonderful life. Job prayed all the time, he gave offerings like he was supposed to, then all of a sudden one day, in a matter of a few seconds, Job lost everything.

Then 3 friends of Job's showed up to try to comfort and help Job. Some comfort - basically they tried to tell Job that he had done something wrong – tried to blame him for being a pretty bad sinner, since nothing like that had ever happened to any of them.

Their belief was that God was punishing Job for something and that he had better figure out what it is and repent – ask for forgiveness.

I recently read a story about a Jewish couple whose bright, beautiful, 19 year old daughter was at college and died suddenly of a brain aneurism. The family's first words to their Rabbi weren't anger, they weren't shock; their first words were, "You know Rabbi, we didn't celebrate Yom Kippur last year." Yom Kippur is the most holy day for Jews – also called the day of Atonement.

This couple blamed themselves for the death of their daughter. They thought that God was punishing them for not observing the high holy day.

How many of us fall into that same mind frame? We do something we know we shouldn't and then something bad happens to us. Do we feel like God is punishing us?

But what kind of God would kill an intelligent, beautiful young girl to punish the parents for not celebrating a holiday? Where is the justice in that? What did that girl do wrong?

We hear about wings falling off airplanes, young people getting murdered, friends dying, other people suffering. Was God punishing them? Was God punishing someone else?

Or, in a lesser way, when we get a flat tire at the precise second we cuss out the driver in front of us, or an unexpected bill comes in right when we thought we were caught up on our finances. Sometimes it simply seems like God is punishing us for something we've done.

Sometimes we think of the same thing when it comes to natural disasters. Maybe God is punishing us as a country.

I want to read for you some of the beliefs people have concerning Hurricane Katrina:

Steve Lefemine, from Columbia Christians for Life, was startled when he viewed a satellite picture of hurricane Katrina. He saw an image of an 8-week old fetus imbedded in the weather pattern. He said: "In my belief, God judged New Orleans for the sin of shedding innocent blood through abortion."

Stan Goodenough, a Christian journalist In Israel, "What America is about to experience is the lifting of God's hand of protection; His judgment is on the nation most responsible for endangering the land and people of Israel."

Ordinary People

"The reason for the hurricane is not only the gambling in New Orleans--a once very Godly community--but also for the U.S.'s weakening support for Israel and the expulsion of Jews from Gaza."

"God sent this Hurricane to wake up the Ungodly people and tell them that you can't mess with him."

Do we hear a theme going on? So many people stand by the fact that God is punishing us for something – punishing our country.

Well, let's take a look at this – according to one report about 1,400 people died because of Hurricane Katrina.

Many people said God was punishing us.

I have a hard time believing that God would use natural disasters to punish us for a couple of reasons:

First and foremost, there are certain laws of nature that have been in existence since the beginning of time. The earth has always had hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis, floods, earthquakes, fires, and drought.

It is these things that helped form the world we live in. These things created the mountains, allow us to have a clean water supply throughout the world, help clean the air, help keep our world in order. These things keep the world we live in – livable.

In our society today, we understand these things. We know that when we hear thunder it isn't because the angels are bowling in heaven. When we have rain it isn't because God is crying. When we have earthquakes it isn't because God is stomping his feet. When we have tornados it isn't because God is turning his finger making the funnel, and hurricanes don't get started because God sneezed.

These are natural events, part of nature, that have been around since God created the earth.

I don't believe God is out there just waiting for us to do something so he can punish us on the spot. The Bible does talk about a day we will have to answer for our sins, but it is talking about the afterlife, not in this life.

Secondly, I cannot believe that God would kill so many innocent people just because a few people sinned, like so many people said about Katrina.

Sure we have stories in the Old Testament about God destroying an entire city – like the raining of fire and brimstone upon Sodom and Gomorrah and completely destroying that city because of their sinful nature. But how quickly we forget the passage in the Bible that really shows God's nature. If you have your Bible's, I'm reading from Genesis 18:22-33.

If there were 10 people in all of Sodom and Gomorrah that weren't evil, God told Abraham that he wouldn't destroy it. Out of the 1420 people that died and the countless thousands that were uprooted from Katrina, do you think there might have been 10 people that weren't evil through and through? I tend to think so.

I am curious how some of the religious talking heads explain the fact that the French Quarter--the area most associated with Southern Decadence – the main area that supposedly God was destroying – that this area suffered less damage than other parts of the city. One French Quarter business owner stated, "If God is trying to punish us in some way, he sure blew it."

We have a God of second chances. A God that doesn't punish individuals in the here and now for using their free will, and we don't have a God that punishes entire cities or states because of the sins of some of the people.

When faced with a woman that had committed adultery, Jesus was asked to judge her. Read John Chapter 8 verses 3-15 to find out what he said.

But sometimes we like things black or white. I believe we will always try to find grounds to justify things that happen to us. In some ways it is easier for us to blame ourselves, or to point a finger to God and blame him for the way our lives are.

But we need to realize as intelligent people, that there are basic laws of nature in our world that God himself has put into place - including free will, and God doesn't just arbitrarily change these laws. God isn't trying to punish us in the here and now for our actions – God wants us to have a prosperous life, God wants us to use our free will to help other people.

So, since God doesn't make these things happen to punish us, my other question would be *where* was God? Where was God when Katrina happened? Where was God on 9/11?

I think we saw God in the hearts of the volunteers, in the hearts of all of those who helped support one another, in the hearts of all of those who sent relief funds, in the hearts of those that prayed for the victims, in the hearts of all of those people who cared.

God is with us and cares very much about us. He wants to give us the strength to get through these problems in our lives.

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