

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Who here has not experienced some unexpected trial, no apparent fault of your own, and have lifted up your eyes to the hills, not asking for help, but wondering, *“Why me, Lord? What have I done to deserve this? What sin have I committed that You are punishing me, Lord?”*

You don’t ask those questions, do you, when you know you’ve done wrong and are caught? You’re grounded for disrespecting your mother; you were ticketed for speeding; your water was shut off for nonpayment. You may not be happy about it; you may say a few angry words. But you don’t wonder *“Why?”*

On the other hand, if you’re the victim of violent weather that destroys your home, you may ask, *“Why, Lord?”* If you’re the victim of an enraged person’s shooting, you may ask, *“What did I do to deserve this?”* If you’re a pregnant woman who has contracted the Zika virus and are worried about your child, you may ask, *“Why am I being punished?”*

The problem of suffering and pain, of loss of home and life or livelihood is a difficult one with few easy answers at the ready. It can cause us to wonder, why does God do or allow such things to happen? It may even give occasion for some, maybe even us, to question the existence of a loving, benevolent God.

That argument goes like this: If God exists, then He is all-powerful. If He is all-powerful, then He is in a position to stop evil and suffering. But experiences like tornadoes and shootings and dreaded diseases—and like that that is told to Jesus in the Gospel—suffering and evil—still go on, with no hint of proportion or justice or mercy. Thus, there cannot be an all-powerful being capable of preventing all this from happening, because, if there were, He surely would do it. Therefore, God does not exist. QED

And if you believe that, then you’re an atheist—a *“there is no god”* person. But atheists offer scant consolation for suffering, except perhaps for a *“suck it up or die,”* because for them, in place of the eternal God, there is just nature, and nature doesn’t care about you. Nature just goes along its purposeless way—a comfortless philosophy.

But even if one does not go so far as to reject God’s existence completely as the atheists do, God’s role in the problem of suffering in the world remains a question to be addressed, and that has caused some to conclude that God is not all-powerful—He just can’t do anything to stop it. But if God can’t do that, then what else can’t God do, and would we call such a being God at all? It seems to me that this argument is just a variation on the God doesn’t exist argument. And here I’m reminded of God’s answer to Job in the midst of suffering: *“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ... Where were you when I laid the*

*foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ... Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?"* And, of course, Job's response, finally, was *"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ... therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."*

Another answer some posit is, since God doesn't stop suffering, it must be that God just doesn't care—He isn't loving after all and has no compassion for you. And, well, apart from God's revelation of the Gospel in Christ Jesus, that's perfectly reasonable. If you only know God by the great, awesome, destructive things He does, it's reasonable to think that God is only angry and vengeful. But we have more than natural knowledge. We have His revelation. He has revealed His compassion and mercy to us in the person of Jesus. He is a loving God that sent His own Son into the flesh and lifted Him up on the tree of the cross and shed His own innocent blood as a ransom for the guilty. The love of God is visible in the Son who healed the sick and bound up the brokenhearted, who welcomed sinners and forgave them. That God isn't loving and doesn't care for you just doesn't compute when you know Jesus. There must be something else to account for suffering.

So maybe it's that God is punishing the multitude for their collective sins. They are receiving their just reward. That's what we heard from some preachers at the time of 9/11. That seems to be the attitude of those who told Jesus about the Galileans, for Jesus asks them, *"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?"* And Jesus Himself recalls another incident: *"Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?"* To both of these Jesus said, *"No, I tell you."*

Indeed, moments earlier Jesus had said to His hearers, *"You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"* Jesus admitted that these things happened; He just rejected what the people thought they meant. We likewise need to reject the conclusions that people make in the face of suffering: that there is no God, that God is not all-powerful, that God doesn't care, that these things are all caused by some particular sin of ours. Jesus says to us, *"No, I tell you."*

That's not to say that sin is not at the root cause of all such disasters. It is, for all the world was corrupted in the fall into sin, and all creation has been groaning ever since as it awaits the time when it *"will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."* But Jesus points us away from blaming the victims at such times as these, and instead points us to our own sinfulness, and calls us to repentance. *"Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."*

This is what the Lord wants of us: repentance, because of our sins. Repentance is all over the Scriptures. You heard it through the prophet in our Old Testament text: *“And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: ‘Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?’ Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, **I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways...**”* That’s a call to repentance! Listen to the psalmist: *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!”* That’s repentance! Jesus came proclaiming a Gospel of repentance and faith (Mark 1:14-15). He came calling sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). He told us of the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7). Here in our Gospel, He tells us to repent of our sins, and to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, as John preached.

Moreover, St. Paul reminds us that it is often through suffering that we are brought to repentance. He says to the Corinthian congregation whom he grieved by the harshness of his first letter to them, *“As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief ... [and] godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret ....”*

Friends, the prophet Jeremiah tells us that *“[the Lord] does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.”* He uses affliction and grief to lead us to acknowledge our sins and lead us to repentance. He wants our repentance because He wants to save us. He doesn’t want our lies or self-deceit when it comes to our sinfulness. He doesn’t want us to point the accusing finger to others while denying our own sinfulness. The Lord wants our honesty. He wants us to admit, in the face of our own suffering or the suffering of others, that *“we justly deserve [His] temporal and eternal punishment.”* Therefore, He wants us to confess our sins that He might display His faithfulness and justice to us and all the world and forgive us. Therefore, you: repent! Trust in Christ and live, for with the preaching of repentance comes the preaching of forgiveness of sins in His name. That’s why we’re on this crossward trek to Good Friday and Easter: to proclaim Him who became sin for us, who took our sin to the cross and atoned for it there, that by looking to Him and trusting in Him, we might be forgiven and given eternal life. It is not of ourselves; it is the gift of God.

Dear saints of God, beloved in the Son lifted up for you, trust in your Lord Jesus Christ, and lean not on yourselves, nor your works, nor your own understandings. Trust in the word He has revealed to you. Trust in the water you have passed through, the spiritual food and spiritual drink He feeds to you. Trust the Rock, Christ. And when trial and temptation, disaster and death dash against you, you shall not fall, for you’ll remember God is still faithful to you; He has not

forsaken you. You'll remember His promise, "*he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*" You'll remember, "*the Lord disciplines the one he loves.*" You'll rejoice, remembering, "*God is treating you as sons,*" partakers of His holiness, yielding the peaceful fruit of righteousness, inheritors of everlasting life. Yes, "*He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*"

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.