

**LAKEWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
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**WHY?**  
**Luke 13:1-9**

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A good philosopher will tell you that knowing the right questions demonstrates more wisdom than knowing the right answers. In that spirit someone has put together a collection of *absurdly, unanswerable questions*:

- For example, why do we say something is “out of whack”? What is a “whack”?
- When someone asks you, “A penny for your thoughts,” and you put your “two cents in” ... what happens to the other penny?
- When “cheese” gets *its* picture taken, what does it say?
- Why is it that if someone tells you that there are one billion stars in the universe you will believe them, but if they tell you a wall has wet paint, you touch it to be sure?

Not every question is made to be answered. And the *question* that is placed before Jesus in this passage of scripture *falls into that category*. The question is “WHY?” “WHY is there suffering in the world?” “WHY do good people die?” “WHY do the innocent suffer as much—if not more—than the guilty?” “WHY?”



According to Luke, chapter 12, many thousands of people had gathered to hear Jesus teach. Many in the crowd were passing along news of a recent tragedy: Pilate’s soldiers had killed some Galilean Jews while they were offering sacrifices in the Temple. The question that troubled the crowd was, “WHY did God allow this to happen?” Had these people committed some terrible sin? Surely that was the only way to explain their horrible death. “WHY did this happen?”



**And here is where we begin today, with a simple declaration: *THERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS THAT WILL NEVER BE ANSWERED.***

Not in this world, anyway. Of course, that doesn’t keep people from trying.



In the movie *Oh, God, Book II*, George Burns, playing the part of God, is asked by a tiny girl why bad things happen. Burns replies:

“That’s the way the system works. Have you ever seen an up, without a down? A front, without a back? A top without a bottom? You can’t have one without the other. If I take away sad, then I take away happy too. They go together.”

Then, with a wry smile, Burns adds:

“If somebody has a better idea, I hope they put it in the suggestion box.”

Obviously *Oh, God, Book II* was never meant to be a theological film. And it’s a *good thing*. Because there *is no definitive answer* to the little girl’s question. We don’t know WHY bad things happen.



In *A Spiritual Autobiography*, Bible scholar William Barclay tells of watching his mother die an agonizing death with cancer of the spine. Through the tragedy, he came face to face with questions that he never solved. *WHY* should his mother—a good woman and otherwise in good health—be forced to die a painful death like that, and just as her son was being ordained as a preacher. His father wisely said to him: “You’ll have a new note in your preaching now.” And he did. Barclay writes: “And so I had ... not the note of one who knew the answers and had solved the problems, but the note of one who now knew what the problems were.”

He didn’t have the *answer*, but now, at least, he understood the question ... as only one can who has walked through that long, dark valley of watching a loved one suffer.



**There is ONE AREA in which science and theology share common ground ... it is the area of MYSTERY.** One of the greatest American physicists, Dr. Edward Teller, was a key scientist in ushering in the atomic age. Speaking to three hundred of the brightest high school seniors in America at a conference at the Crystal Cathedral, Dr. Teller challenged them, “Become scientists, and all your life remember these words: *I DON’T KNOW.*”

**Those are good words: “I DON’T KNOW.”** There are some things that even the brightest and best scientists and theologians *JUST DON’T KNOW.*



**Here is the second thing that we need to see: THERE ARE TRAGEDIES THAT COME INTO OUR LIVES FOR WHICH WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE.**

It is sad, but children who are suffering from pain or disease often believe that it’s because they did something wrong to deserve what they are going through.



In their book, *The Emotional Care of Hospitalized Children*, pediatric nurse Madeline Petrillo and pediatrician Siray Sanger describe Danny, a two-year-old leukemia victim. As the nurse pierced his tiny arm with an intravenous needle to begin still another painful round of chemotherapy, Danny screamed over and over again, “*I’m sorry; I said I’m sorry.*” Danny was convinced that his pain was punishment for something he had done.



In 1976, twenty-six children in Chow-chilla, a rural community, in the San Joaquin Valley of California, were kidnapped at gunpoint by three masked men who took over the school bus on which they were riding. The victims were buried in a hole, which was actually a truck trailer placed underground and covered with a layer of earth. After sixteen hours, the kidnappers finally left and the terrorized children dug themselves out.

- ➔ One child, 11-year-old Sheila, had argued bitterly with her mother on the morning of the kidnapping, and had left for school screaming, “*You’re the meanest mother in the world!*” For years afterward, Sheila linked that parting shot at her mom to her trauma.
- ➔ Another child, 14-year-old Bob, dawdled so much that morning that his mother, instead of driving as usual, ordered him to take the bus. In Bob’s mind, the logic was clear: *the kidnapping was his punishment for being so slow.*

How tragic for children who are suffering physical pain, to add to it the mental and emotional pain of feeling guilty for something beyond their control.

You do know that *CHILDREN* are not the *ONLY ONES* who make that mistake?



Tony Campolo tells about the father of a friend of his who was dying of cancer. His friend wrote to a prominent media preacher and asked for prayers for healing. The preacher responded by saying, that if *ALL* of the members of the family would get right with God and pray, their father would be healed. The family members did everything the preacher had prescribed, rededicating themselves to God and praying for healing for their father. However, in spite of *ALL* their spiritual exercises, their father still died.

Another letter was sent to the TV evangelist for guidance and for an explanation of their father's death. In the answering letter, the family members were told that their father died because of "*un-confessed sin in their lives.*" Can you just imagine what that letter did? Those family members were convinced that he/she was responsible for their father's death. *The tragedy of their father's suffering and death was compounded by his children's needless guilt.*

Let me say it again: There are tragedies that come into our lives for which we are *NOT RESPONSIBLE*.

This man's children were suffering from the same flawed theology that plagued Jesus' listeners. They believed that if you are a good person, *GOOD* things will happen to you. If you are a bad person, *BAD* things will happen to you.

And, even worse, some of them believed that God might choose to hurt or punish members of your family because of *YOUR* sins.



Before we smirk at this simplistic world view, let's examine our own beliefs for a moment. *How many times* in the midst of a tragedy have we said, "*But it's not fair! Why me?*" *How many times* have we secretly agreed with the television evangelist who says that *TRUE CHRISTIANS* should experience *endless fulfillment and joy*? "If you are really living in God's will, you'll never be poor, sick, or unhappy. Your every prayer will be answered just the way you want it to be." *We rarely admit it, but we want to believe that this is how God runs the Universe.*

Then along comes something to *SHAKE UP* our world view. *Maybe it's a call* from the police to come down and post bail for your child. *Maybe it's the instant* when the doctor says, "I'm sorry, but it's malignant." *Maybe it's the moment* when your husband says, "I've found somebody else." All of a sudden, your world is out of balance, and from the very depths of your being you want to cry out, "*WHY me? I'm a GOOD person. What did I do to deserve THIS?*"



"*Expecting life to treat you well, because you are a good person,*" someone once said, "*is like expecting an angry bull not to charge you because you are a vegetarian.*"

But that is the kind of faith many Christians have. We think that if we pray enough, or study the Scriptures enough, or practice the right spiritual disciplines, somehow, because of *OUR* virtue, God will spare us much of the pain of life. *But that's just NOT the way it works! I wish it did! Believe me!!*



In his novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Thornton Wilder wrote about a little village in South America. Each day, the villagers made their way across a bridge to go to the fields. One day, without warning, the bridge snapped. Six persons fell to their deaths. There was a priest in the village who said, "*Aha! I will do research into these people's lives and show why those six people were on the bridge when it fell. I will*

prove beyond a doubt that if you do bad things, bad will happen to you, and if you do good things, good will be done to you.” He studied every aspect of their lives and came to this conclusion: “Those six people were no worse, nor no better than anyone in the village. God does allow the sun and the rain to fall upon the GOOD and the BAD.”

Hear what the Spirit has to say to the church, friends: *There are some things we CANNOT UNDERSTAND, and there are tragedies in our lives for which we are NOT RESPONSIBLE.*



**But there is ONE MORE THING WE NEED TO SAY.** Ann Snow sang the song so beautifully for us, *My Faith Looks Up to Thee*, it's the third verse I want us to focus on:

*While life's dark maze I tread, and griefs around me spread,  
be thou my guide;  
Bid darkness turn to day, wipe sorrow's tears away,  
nor let me ever stray from thee aside.*

*There are some things we CANNOT UNDERSTAND, and there are tragedies in our lives for which we are NOT RESPONSIBLE, but in the midst of it, five words from Psalm 23 make all the difference. The Psalmist writes: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil” ... and then these five words ... “FOR THOU ART WITH ME.”*

***It is when WE stray from God's side that we experience our greatest despair ... for God IS there ... THAT is the PROMISE.***



Benjamin Hirsch, a survivor of the Holocaust, tells a story about the ancient rabbi Baal Shem-Tov. One day, the rabbi and his students were standing on a hill when they noticed foreign troops invading their town. From their vantage point on the hill, they were able to see all the horror and violence of the attack. The rabbi looked up to Heaven and cried out, “*Oh, if only I were God.*”

One of his student asked, “But, Master, if you were God, what would you do differently?”

The rabbi answered him, “*If I were God, I would do nothing differently. If I were God, I would understand and then I would weep.*”

**God DOES understand and because God is ALL-LOVING, we know we will never be out of God's LOVING CARE.**



The writer of Psalm 56:8 says of God, “*You have collected all my tears and preserved them in your bottle! You have recorded every one in your book.*” William Barclay suggests that this Psalm might refer to an ancient custom in the Middle East.

When a soldier went off to war, he would leave behind with his wife or mother a small bottle ... a tear bottle. Her promise to him was that she would collect all her tears while he was gone. When he returned, he would know how devoted her love was for him.

God knows every tear that we've ever cried.

We never suffer alone.

“FOR THOU ART WITH ME.”



Pastor Robert Schuller once told about a special visit he made to South Africa to speak before an audience of African leaders. Most of these people had suffered

tremendously standing up for justice. As Schuller stood and faced his audience, he was struck by the knowledge of this suffering, and his speech suddenly seemed so insignificant. *The emotion of the moment moved Schuller to tears.*

A man in the audience came forward and put his hand on Schuller's shoulder. He understood the reason for the tears, and he had come to stand in *solidarity* and *compassion* with the visiting pastor. His eyes welled up with tears also, as he said, "Dr. Schuller, among our people we will not let anyone cry alone."

Neither will God. God understands this world and God sees when people are hurt by it. God sees our weariness and our weakness, and God rushes in to bind up our wounds. We never face this world alone.

In Psalm 139 it says, "Where can I flee from your presence? Where can I go from your Spirit? If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even THERE you will find me and THERE you will hold me..."

**AND HERE TODAY GOD IS PRESENT ...**

- ➔ **SO OFTEN** in the flesh and blood of a brother or sister ... the body of Christ, the church ... who can hold our hand;
- ➔ **OR** eke out a smile when we can't;
- ➔ **OR** form words to a prayer when our faith is gone;
- ➔ **OR** stand next to us and sing a song that we don't know or we can't sing;
- ➔ **OR** confess a faith that we used to confess, but can't at the moment.

**We NEED each other to stand among ... to bear silent witness to our solidarity, our oneness in the midst of pain ... to form together God's greatest response THROUGH US ... this loving family of God.**

**And I ABSOLUTELY believe ... THAT is God's GREATEST work.**



**There are some things we CANNOT UNDERSTAND, and there are tragedies in our lives for which we are NOT RESPONSIBLE, but I believe there is something we can do ... we can IMITATE the way God responds:**

- ➔ to bind up the wounds of the afflicted,
- ➔ to comfort the bereaved, to bring healing to the injured,
- ➔ to bring aid to those who have lost their livelihoods and homes,
- ➔ to be an advocate for justice where injustice exists.

**And so, my brothers and sisters, I encourage you to pray NOT for ability to understand ... YOU NEVER WILL. Pray, instead for the ability to TRUST. Don't let anyone tell you that God is punishing you when life gets hard. The sun and the rain falls on the GOOD and the BAD. But God UNDERSTANDS. And through US, God's greatest response is realized ... LOVE.**

**Amen and Amen.**