



# **The Investigator's Gospel**

## **An Eyewitness Journey Through Luke**

### **Session 13 – Chapter 13 – the Problem of Suffering**

#### **Luke 13:1-5**

*About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple. “Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?” Jesus asked. “Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God.*

*“And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too.”*

The concept that physical infirmity or personal tragedy was a direct result of sin is a prevalent idea in many faiths and philosophies, and has persisted even in our own secular society. The idea has a long history in Jewish religious thought as well. Much of this thinking is based upon verses such as Exodus 34:7(NLT): *“I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected — even children in the third and fourth generations.”*

However, the Scriptures began to clarify such statements (this formula is repeated in Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).

*Deuteronomy 24:16 “Parents must not be put to death for the sins of their children, nor children for the sins of their parents. Those deserving to die must be put to death for their own crimes.*

*Ezekiel 18:4 For all people are mine to judge—both parents and children alike. And this is my rule: The person who sins is the one who will die.*

These verses, combined with the passage from Exodus 34:7, hold two concepts in balance: there are trans-generational impacts to sin, but people are at the same time responsible for their own actions. For example, alcohol abuse may well harm a family trans-generationally, and impact the children and even grandchildren in countless long-term ways – financial, social, developmental, psychological. However, it is not the child's responsibility that the parent struggles with alcohol; and the child is also responsible for their own actions later in life.

The most complete rejection of the idea that calamity or illness befalls us because of sin – either personal or familial – is found in the Book of Job. Job loses wealth, health and family, and while in mourning, is visited by friends who offer comfort. They attempt to rationalise Job's problem – he must have sinned, either knowingly or unknowingly, or his children must have sinned, for Job to be punished so. However, a fourth friend, Elihu, rejects the counsel of these friends (as does God in Job 42:7-9) indicating that all the works of God are intended to reveal God's power and glory, and to remind us of our dependence upon Him for salvation

(Job 33:29-30): *“God does all these things to a person—twice, even three times—to turn them back from the pit, that the light of life may shine on them.”*

Jesus affirms this in the Luke 13:1-5 passage, when informed about some people killed by Pilate. No cause-and-effect between sinful behaviour and tragedy is drawn by Jesus; rather, such events are regarded as warnings to regard our mortality as fragile, and our spiritual condition as vital.

As in Job, Jesus affirms that all events in our lives should be reminders to seek help and salvation from God. Tragedies in the lives of others are opportunities for us to respond with compassionate help, and thus reveal the power of God at work in the world.

A passage from John 9 is the most explicit rejection by Jesus of the concept that infirmity is the direct result of ancestral or personal sin (**John 9:1-3**):

*As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. “Rabbi,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?”*

*“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered. “This happened so the power of God could be seen in him.”*

Nevertheless, the bigger question is raised: **“How can a supposedly good God allow suffering and evil?”**

## **Summary of the Biblical Story**

### **The world – as created – was Good**

- The world in all its variety, fertility and abundance requires the natural forces which often produce cataclysmic (but not necessarily unforeseen) consequences for the world’s inhabitants
- *Genesis 1:31 - God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*

### **Humanity was created to be in loving relationship with God and the world**

- The existence of love and relationship requires the existence of free will – of “choice”
- *Genesis 2:16-17 - And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”*

### **The world in its current state is a distortion of the original state**

- The rejection of this loving relationship by humanity constituted rebellion against God and disharmony with creation and with one another
- *Genesis 3:17 - To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.*

**The existence of evil forces in the world is attributed to another order of creation in rebellion against God – but not equal with God**

- Satan is presented in Scripture as a created heavenly being – a fallen angel – whose desire for personal power apart from God led to downfall
- *Revelation 12:9 - The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*
- Satan is pictured as powerless apart from our willing complicity
- *Genesis 3:1 - Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”*

**The Bible is a story of the gradual recreation of the world – and of the human condition**

- The Flood is described as a failed recreation, based on the exercise of arbitrary power over nature, which fails to address the relational problem of the human heart
- *Genesis 8:21 - “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.”*

**The plan of God is the restoration of relationship between God and humanity, humanity with humanity, and humanity with creation**

- The covenant with Noah is to not restore through natural destruction (see above)
- The covenant with Abraham is to effect restoration through a people of restoration
- *Genesis 12:2-3 - “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*
- The 10 Commandments are the guidelines to the restoration of relationship (Exodus 20)
  - 1 *“You shall have no other gods before me.*
  - 2 *“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them;*
  - 3 *“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God,*
  - 4 *“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.*
  - 5 *“Honor your father and your mother,*
  - 6 *“You shall not murder.*
  - 7 *“You shall not commit adultery.*
  - 8 *“You shall not steal.*
  - 9 *“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*
  - 10 *“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”*

- Ultimately, these three covenants prove unsuccessful.

### **Jesus is God's reclamation of the human heart, and the response to suffering and pain - humanity in perfect harmony with God, humanity and creation**

- Jesus' teachings recapture the intent behind the Law
- *Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."*
- Jesus' miracles are a reminder of the power of humanity in perfect harmony with nature
- *Matthew 8:26-27 - He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"*
- Jesus' interactions with others are without self-interest ("sin")
- *John 8:7 - When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."*
- Jesus' prayers recapture the intimacy with God once held naturally by all
- *John 11:41-42 - So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."*

### **Jesus' sacrifice is the necessary cost of the restoration of relationship between humanity and God**

- We are now able to be in restored relationship with God, with "new hearts and minds"
- *2 Corinthians 5:17 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*

### **Jesus' resurrection is the foretaste of the recreation of our damaged selves**

- Our resurrected bodies are impervious to suffering, pain and death
- *1 Corinthians 15:42-44 - So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; 43 it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; 44 it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.*

### **After the restoration of the human condition, there will be a recreation of our world**

- The Biblical descriptions of the "New heaven and earth" all point to a world restored to its original order, harmony and intent
- *Revelation 21:1-4 - Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. '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."*

## **Summary of Points of Understanding**

### **Point One: Evil was not created by God**

- The potential for evil was inherent in the creation of free choice, love and relationship, none of which can exist without their opposite states of compulsion, indifference and selfishness.

### **Point Two: Much suffering and pain is a result of seemingly benign choices we make, or choices humans have made in the past which continue to affect us.**

- We make choices regarding environment, location, consumption, standard of living, modes of transport, etc., many of which involve inherent assumed risk, either immediate or long-term (ie health deterioration)

### **Point Three: Much of human suffering (estimates border on 90%) is directly attributable to human activity**

- We often ignore our own complicity in this, and ask God to strike down only the most identifiable evildoers.

### **Point Four: Much physical pain we experience is for our benefit, a necessary physiological response to trauma**

- People without the capacity to feel pain also lack the capacity for physical self-protection

### **Point five: Much emotional suffering we experience is the consequence of both positive and negative factors**

- “Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all”
- Unrealistic expectations and disappointment lead to unnecessary suffering

### **Point Five: “Goodness” and “Kindness” are not to be confused**

- God seems to be of the opinion that a certain amount of struggle, suffering and pain are necessary for us to become mature, strong, spiritually aware adults

### **Point Six: We are not in balance between our spiritual and physical selves**

- We put far more emphasis on physical well-being than on spiritual maturity

### **Point Seven: We fail to regard our current state in the light of eternity**

- Our inability to correctly perceive our current experience as but a small part of our eternal existence increases our perception of pain and suffering

### **Point Eight: We are not alone in our pain and suffering**

- Jesus was subjected to pain and suffering, and is not above understanding us within it

**Point Nine: Sometimes some suffering and pain are necessary for good to be accomplished**

- The surgeon must cause pain to do good
- sometimes self-sacrifice is necessary for the good of the community

**Point Ten: We do live in a world of pain and suffering. It is part of our recognised reality.**

- Not believing in God does not make the pain and suffering go away. Belief in God puts the pain and suffering of the world into a larger context.
- Our ability to judge pain and suffering as aberrant to the human condition demonstrates an internal knowledge that things were not meant to be that way
- Similarly, our identification of pain and suffering as “evil” implies an acknowledgement of a universal standard of “good.” Where did that come from, if not from God?

**Quotes:**

God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. No doubt pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul. If the first and lowest operation of pain shatters the illusion that all is well, the second shatters the illusion that what we have, whether good or bad itself, is our own and enough for us. (The Problem of Pain by C.S. Lewis, page 95)

God’s ultimate answer to suffering isn’t an explanation; it’s the incarnation. Suffering is a personal problem; it demands a personal response. And God isn’t some distant, detached, and disinterested deity; He entered into our world and into our pain. Jesus is there, sitting beside us in the lowest places of our lives.

Are you broken? He was broken, like bread, for us. Are you despised? He was despised and rejected of men. Do you cry out that you can’t take any more? He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Did someone betray you? He was sold out. Are your tenderest relationships broken? He loved and was rejected. Did people turn from you? They hid their faces from him as if he were a leper. Does he descend into all of our hells? Yes, he does.

From the depths of a Nazi death camp, Corrie ten Boom wrote these words: “No matter how deep our darkness, he is deeper still.” Every tear we shed becomes his tear.

One theologian said: *It’s not just that God knows and sympathizes with you in your troubles, as any close friend might do. For He is so much closer than the closest friend if you’ve put your trust in Him. Then, He is in you. And, therefore, your sufferings are His sufferings; your sorrow is His sorrow. And when you make the choice to run into His arms, instead of bitterness and chronic anger, you’ll find peace and courage and love and hope and eternal life in heaven.* (Lee Strobel - “Why Does God Allow Tragedy & Suffering”)