

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, August 15, 1993, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

LUKE 13:4 and EZEKIEL 18:4

"...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?"

"The soul who sins will die."

AN ANCIENT TRAGEDY

A question which people are constantly asking today is this -- "How could God allow this or that to happen? How could He take my baby from me? Why was my son killed in a car accident in the prime of his life? Why does God permit evil and suffering to go on and on and on?"

Now, there are two ways in which you can ask that question:

(1) You can ask it this way: "God, I don't understand why there's so much suffering in the world. I know that You are righteous and holy. I know that the Judge of all the earth must do right (Genesis 18:25). But sometimes I'm bewildered; I don't understand the reasons for all this pain and heartbreak." That's one way you can ask the question, and when you ask God humbly in that way, He is not angry with you. Indeed, He is happy to respond to your question, and give you light amid your darkness.

(2) But when you come into His presence and say, "God, why do You allow all this horrible suffering in the world, and why do You pick on me?", you are not really asking a question, you are making a presumptuous and arrogant accusation.

A question like that was put to Jesus one day. You see, there was this tower at the southeast corner of Jerusalem's wall, near the pool of Siloam. One day, for some reason which isn't stated, this tower came crashing down. People came running to tell Jesus about the tragedy. Listen to them -- "Hey, Jesus, eighteen people have just been killed; the Siloam tower collapsed and crushed them to death. Tell us, Rabbi, how could a good and loving God allow eighteen innocent people walking down the street, minding their own business, to be snuffed out in an instant? Here tragedy has come to eighteen families. Just think of the untold suffering and misery that will result from this calamity. Where is God in all this, Jesus?"

Do you remember what Jesus said? Did He say, "Well, I know I've told you what our great King David says in Psalm 121:4: 'He Who watches over you neither slumbers nor sleeps.' But don't you understand that that is Hebrew poetry? It is hyperbole. Even My heavenly Father gets tired, and this afternoon He just took thirty winks to revitalize His energy, and while He was having His little cat-nap, the tower came crashing down. These things happen. I'm very sorry. Nobody is perfect. But I promise you I'll talk to My Father about it, and see if He will make some kind of restitution to the families involved." That's not what Jesus said!

Or did He say, "Remember how I told you about My Father's kindly providence -- how He cares for every single thing in His universe, even noticing when a sparrow falls to the ground, even counting the very hairs of your head. I meant what I said. Nothing escapes His notice. But don't you see what a herculean task it is for Him to do all these things? Consider the attention it takes to notice every one of these little birds, and to count every hair on every human being's head. Well, I surmise that this afternoon God was so busy with one particularly bushy-haired man that it simply escaped His notice that this tower collapsed." That's not what Jesus said either.

What did He say? What did the Lord of the Christian Church say in answer to that question? Before we consider what Jesus really said, it might be well to go back to the Old Testament, because people sometimes say that in Old Testament times God often meted out cruel and unusual punishment.

In Old Testament Law, the death penalty was imposed for the striking or cursing of parents, desecrating sacrificial offerings, murder, kidnapping, idolatry, child sacrifice, blasphemy, Sabbath violations, the practice of magic, the consultation of mediums and wizards, unlawful divorce, homosexuality, incest, bestiality, prostitution, rape, adultery, false prophesy, and so on. About thirty crimes called for the death penalty.

Now, that seems to be unduly severe in the light of our modern culture and in the light of the New Testament attitude that seems to abrogate capital punishment in most of these situations.

An article appeared in Time magazine some years ago about an incident that took place in Maryland. A truck driver had been arrested for drunken and disorderly conduct, and when the policeman came to arrest this man who was behaving in a very unruly fashion, the truck driver resisted arrest and began to hurl all sorts of insults and obscenities at the arresting officer, using blasphemous language as he was resisting arrest. So when they brought him before the court, the judge decided to throw the book at him. The maximum penalty he could impose according to the Maryland statutes was a \$100 fine, plus thirty days in jail for drunken and disorderly conduct. He wanted to teach this man a lesson, so he applied an old law that was on the books which prohibited public blasphemy. That carried with it the punishment of thirty days in jail plus a \$100 fine. So the judge gave the man sixty days in jail plus a \$200 fine! The editorial in Time magazine was incredulous that there could be such a law on the books of America and that a person could be punished by imprisonment and a fine for merely blaspheming the name of God publicly; and it went on about this antiquated miscarriage of justice that we find in the State of Maryland!

But we ask the question, ultimately, which is more serious -- to be involved in drunken and disorderly conduct, or to publicly blaspheme the One Who alone is ultimately holy?

You see, in the Old Testament, the penalty for blasphemy was death. In the State of Maryland, it was a thirty-day jail sentence and a \$100 fine! But

in this day and age, this was seen as a severe judgment for the sin of blasphemy.

Of course this raises the question -- what is our evaluation of the sinfulness of sin? We have a tendency to make light of such a thing as blasphemy today, but if we look at the Biblical revelation, we see a value system that is antithetical to the value system that we operate with in our secular culture. In Israel's culture, blasphemy was an extremely serious thing. To pour insult upon the name of God is the highest kind of rebellion against the Creator of the universe.

In the Old Testament we see about thirty crimes regarded as capital offenses. In the New Testament we see Jesus presumably abrogating the penalty in the case of adultery and having a much more generous position on some of these things. So we have a tendency to judge the Old Testament Law in the light of the New Testament situation. In comparison, that old Law certainly appears to be severe. But the important thing is to judge the Old Testament Law not against the New Testament standard of forbearance and mercy, but against what God said at creation. At creation, all sin was viewed as a capital offense. God said, "The soul who sins will die" (Ezekiel 18:4). That is to say, God is not obliged to bestow on us the gift of life. The gift of life was conditional upon man's obedience. The task that was given to man at creation was to bear witness to the holiness of God; to be God's image-bearer; to manifest to the world the very nature of God. When God created man and put him on probation, He said, "If you sin, you lose the gift of life; you forfeit any claim to human existence."

When was the penalty for that sin to be meted out? Does it mean that if you sin, then someday after you've had your three score and ten years on this earth, you will undergo the process of mortality and die? That is not the judgment God made in creation. In the warning that went along with His prohibition of sin He said, "In the day that you eat (of the fruit of the tree), you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). That is to say, the original law of creation, given to Adam was -- "The day you sin, you die."

Now the question we have to ask is this: Is that unjust? Is it unjust for the God Who creates freely and voluntarily, Who gives man the mandate to be the image-bearer of the all-holy God -- is it unjust for Him to take away that gift of life if the gift of life is used not for its purpose in creation, but becomes rather the opportunity for man to become involved in cosmic treason; for that is what sin is -- cosmic treason against the Creator Himself.

Have you ever considered the implications of the slightest sin you ever commit? What are you saying about your relationship to your Creator, to the Sovereign One, when you disobey at even the slightest point? You are saying, "No", to the righteousness of God. You are saying, "God, Your Law is not good. My judgment is better than yours. Your authority does not apply to me. I am above Your sphere of authority. I have the right to do my own thing." So you see, the slightest act of sin is an act of defiance against cosmic authority. It is a rebellious and revolutionary act in which we set ourselves

in opposition to the One to Whom we owe everything, even the gift of life itself. It is an insult to His holiness.

Hans Kung, the Roman Catholic theologian, says that this about the creation situation: "What constitutes the most mysterious aspect of the mystery of sin is not that the sinner deserves to die, which is rather self-evident; but rather, that the sinner in the average situation, continues to exist!" Why does God tolerate life at all? That's the question. Kung continues: "Don't you see that God was forbearing in the Old Testament. The history of the Old Testament is not the history of God's wrath; it is the history of His patience." God is long-suffering, desiring sinners to come to repentance. But His forbearance must never lead us to apathy, or to the expectation that He will always be merciful. In a word, we must never expect or assume the mercy of God.

You see the point, don't you? If we view the thirty capital offenses in the Old Testament against the background of the mercy that we experience at the hand of God, they appear severe. But, if we compare them to the principle of justice laid down in creation, we see that in the Old Testament, this list of thirty sins that are capital offenses represents a radical reduction in the list of capital crimes. It already represents the spirit of forbearance and tolerance that reveals God's mercy. God did not kill Adam and Eve the day that they sinned. God does not impose death for every sin in the Old Testament. He has already reduced the list from an infinite number of possible sins to a very small number of things that He considers to be gross and heinous sins against His holiness and against the dignity and sanctity of human life.

Now, let us return to the collapse of the tower in Siloam and the answer Jesus gave to the people who said to Him, "Rabbi, how could a good and loving God allow eighteen innocent people to be killed in such a horrible way?" To those inquirers He simply said this, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (verse 5). What is Jesus saying? What does He mean? It is a "hard saying" (John 6:60) -- "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Do you see what Jesus is saying? He's saying, "You're asking Me the wrong question. The question you should be asking is not, 'Why did that tower fall on eighteen innocent people?'. The question is, 'Why didn't that tower fall on my head?'"

The most bewildering theological question that no theologian I know of has ever been able to penetrate or answer, is the question, "Why does God tolerate us? Why are we allowed to live? Why do we receive His mercy and grace? Why, since I got up this morning, did God not erase me and my sinful influence from His world?" He doesn't owe me the gift of life. I've forfeited a thousand times my right to life. He is not obliged to keep the sinner alive. "The soul who sins will die." Why are we allowed to live? Answer that question before you ask the question about God's justice.

You see what has happened, don't you? We have become accustomed to mercy. We take it for granted. Our hearts have become hardened. We've come

to expect mercy; but worse still, we've come to demand it. We've made a fundamental confusion intellectually between justice and mercy. How many times have I heard people say, "Why doesn't God be merciful?"; as if God were obliged to be merciful.

Look at it this way -- If God owes you mercy; if He is obliged to be merciful to you; if mercy is demanded; can we then still call it "mercy"? If mercy is required; if mercy is obligatory; then we must not call it mercy; we must call it justice. But the essence of mercy is in its voluntary character -- "I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy", God says (Exodus 33:19). It is His divine prerogative to pardon whom He will. It is His divine prerogative to show mercy to whom He will.

You remember our Lord's parable (Matthew 20:1-16) about the workers in the vineyard. The landowner hired some men at 6 a.m., and agreed to pay them each a denarius which was the usual daily wage. It was the daily wage a Roman soldier received. Then at 5 p.m., just one hour before quitting time, he hired some men who hadn't been able to find work all day. At 6 p.m. when they lined up to receive their wages, the landowner paid all the men the same amount -- one denarius. Of course, those hired in early morning complained because they had worked so much longer; but the employer said, "Friend, I'm not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" God has mercy on whom He pleases.

But note this carefully -- Never do we see God pardoning one person and giving injustice to another. He may give mercy to one, and justice to another. He has the freedom to be merciful, but He is not required to be merciful. This is the question I can't answer -- "Why is God merciful?" I can understand justice, but His mercy staggers my imagination.

I have sometimes warned people who complain against the way God treats them, and I have said to them, "When you pray, there's one thing I hope you'll never pray for, and that is justice. Don't ever ask God for justice, because you just might get it."

I'm sure you have read all the scenes of the Last Judgment that Christ portrays for us in the Gospels. The final tribunal is described for us as the righteous Judge of all the earth brings all creation before Him in judgment. Have you noticed that in every single case, when the verdict is pronounced, the response of the wicked is silence? They know that there is no defense left. They know there is no plea-bargaining available. They know that their own words and actions have condemned them.

Only once in human history has an innocent Man suffered. If there is any point at which we can raise serious questions about justice; if there is one single act that should offend us and our sense of justice; if there is any place where God can conceivably be considered to be cruel and unjust; you won't find that in the Old Testament; you will find it in the New Testament, where the Innocent dies for the sake of the unrighteous. Justice is waived;

the Just is punished; the Innocent is murdered. Yet that death on Calvary where God Himself took the sinners' place and suffered the sinners' punishment, is the highest expression of mercy that we know, because it happened for you and for me. Always remember that as you reflect upon the matter of God's holiness and justice.

God will be treated as holy by those who draw near to Him. In ourselves we are sinful and unholy, and yet we draw near to God in the sure confidence that the Innocent One has borne the punishment which His own holy Law demanded -- and He has borne that punishment for us.

What ought to be the outcome on our part of this glorious realization that Jesus died for our sins and has set us free from sin's guilt and power? To answer that question, listen to those sublime words of the Apostle Paul as he writes to Titus: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope -- the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness, and to purify for Himself a people Who are His very own, eager to do what is good."

Let us be that kind of people!

Amen.