

Sermon for Sunday, September 5, 1982, by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, Senior Pastor
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"DOES GOD TAKE A COFFEE BREAK?"
Romans 8:28-39

Text: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him,
who are called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28

The Bible tells us that in everything God is working for our good. But did you ever have things go so badly that you wondered if God was on a coffee break rather than working for your good? I know there have been times in my life when I felt that way. Some plan would go terribly wrong, some dream would blow up in my face, or the day a doctor put his hand on my arm and said, "I have to tell you, it was malignant." Yes, those were times when I wondered if God really was working for my good. Those were times when I wondered if He wasn't really taking a coffee break.

Well, how do you explain evil? How do you understand it when a loved one is taken in death? How do you understand it when an innocent young child is struck by some terrible disease, or a little baby is born with some terrible defect? How can we understand it when our job suddenly turns sour, or when the love of a mate grows cold and a marriage comes apart at the seams? Is this really God working for our good or is he out on a coffee break?

We could say that tragedy and disaster is God's punishment for sin. We could say that but it creates some serious problems. It means we attribute a character to God that is below our own for even we poor humans can sometimes find it within our power to forgive a wrong done us by another. And besides, if tragedy is the punishment for sin, why are some seemingly good people caused to suffer greatly while obviously some very wicked people seem to prosper? The writer of the 73rd Psalm asked that very question. He wrote, "For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs; their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in trouble as other men are; they are not stricken like other men." So, to say that tragedy is punishment for sin is not a very satisfactory answer.

On the other hand, we might say that despair and disaster are the work of the devil or some evil spirit in our lives. Yet, if we say that it means there is a power in the universe which wrecks the lives of men and brings troubles and sorrow upon them and either God is not powerful enough to prevent these things from happening to us or else He does not care enough to do something about it. Either way, God ends up looking bad. Either He isn't strong enough to help us or He doesn't care enough to help us. So, to say our troubles are the work of the devil isn't a very happy answer either.

A third way to explain evil would be to say that it is God's plan for us. When tragedy comes or disaster strikes we say, "It is God's will." Have you known of someone--or perhaps you have said it yourself--when some trouble strikes, "Well, it is the will of God. I don't understand it, I don't like it, but I can't do anything about it--it is God's will." Well, I will tell you the truth, I find that a little hard to believe. When something terrible happens to me, am I to believe that this is God's plan for me even when I don't see it or understand it

smashing together on the highway, a human cell gone insane and growing in wild disorder that we call cancer, a virus that attacks the nerve cells and leaves a person paralyzed and dying, a vein that bursts in the brain, a heart muscle that wears out.

Maybe you never thought of it just this way before, but not only do you and all the people in the world need redeeming, but the very world we live in needs redeeming, too. St. Paul once wrote that the whole universe is longing and groaning, waiting for its redemption. And that's what the Bible means when it speaks of a new heaven and a new earth--a time when all of creation will be redeemed and restored as God meant it to be. Centuries ago a Hebrew prophet named Isaiah dreamed of the time when God's universe would be redeemed and restored and when everything would work in perfect harmony. He wrote, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox....they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:1-9) Isn't that a wonderful picture? That's the kind of harmony God intended for His creation--no more pain, no more sickness, no more death. Do you remember how the book of Revelation puts it? "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Rev. 21:4)

Yes, there is trouble in the world, but not because God is on a coffee break. There is trouble in the world because I need redeeming and my world needs redeeming. The third clue the Bible gives us about evil is this: God has already begun the process of redeeming me and my world. It began a long time ago--from the foundation of the earth, the Bible says. It began when God called Abraham, when he led the Children of Israel out of Egypt, when he gave them the promised land. And then, in the fullness of time, through that chosen people, there was born a child whose name was called Jesus. He was God's son. One day they took him out and nailed him to a cross....and that day he died. It was for my brokenness and for the brokenness of my world that he died. He bore my sins, he died my death that day. And God said, "If you will accept it, I will count his death for you. I will forgive you and redeem you. It can't happen all at once, but you will have new life. You will still suffer much, but in everything that happens to you because of sin, I will turn it to your good. I won't be out on a coffee break, but I'll be at work in all that happens and no matter how bad it may seem or how terrible it is, I will make it turn out for your good. And at the end, when you look back across the years, you will see then that my hand was on you and in spite of sin, my plan for your life was getting itself worked out." Yes, that is how it is. God didn't send the sin and sorrow, the trouble and disaster, but if we love Him, redemption is already at work in our lives. In spite of sin, His purpose is getting itself worked out in our lives. And we can trust Him--not because life is always good, not because we like it or even understand it, but because in spite of the worst life can do we know God isn't taking a break, but He is working in everything for our good.

Some weeks ago, some of you may have seen it, I was watching Channel 9 and they were doing a program on the building of the Brooklyn Bridge which I believe is 100 years old this year. The architect and engineer who designed the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City was injured during the early stages of the construction.

and my heart is breaking within me? I want you to know that I wouldn't treat one of my children that way.

I remember some years ago when my oldest son was about 10 or 11. He had a paper route and there was a big dog on the route. He didn't want to deliver the paper at that house because he was afraid--and rightfully so--of that big dog. We sat down and talked about it. We discussed having fears and facing them. We talked about having to do things we didn't want to even when we were afraid because if we didn't then our fears would control us. We talked about learning to say to our fears, "Well, okay, I'm good and scared, but I'm not running from you anymore, Fear. I'm not going to let you control my life." So, he delivered the paper to that house every day. And every day I'm sure his heart pounded when he went up that walk. But at least he understood why he had to go through that torment and torture. Now, if I would do that for my boy to help him understand and face a hard place in life, wouldn't God do as much for me when trouble, sorrow and disaster come my way?

So, to say that all of the trouble and problems of life are just God's will for us isn't a very good solution either.

The Bible says that "God works for good" but sometimes we wonder if He isn't taking a coffee break. How are we to understand that? Well, the Bible gives us some clues and I want to share them with you. The first clue the Bible gives us is something about ourselves. The Bible says that we are not what God meant for us to be. Something happened to us. And the thing that happened to us was that we rebelled against God. We broke fellowship with God. We disobeyed God. We turned our backs on God. And when we did that, the Bible in the early chapters of Genesis goes on to spell out in awful, dramatic terms what that rebellion and disobedience does to mankind. The Bible paints with a broad brush and in bold strokes the disaster in human life when we turn our backs on God.

I used to wonder why God let mankind sin. Why would He let us spoil something like the Garden of Eden? But then I remembered--God made me free. I am truly a real person, truly human, because I was given freedom. God could have made me a robot. He could have made me to automatically love Him or obey Him. But if you program a computer to do something, is it any virtue on the part of the computer when it does what it is told to do? No--so God didn't want a computer or a robot or an automaton. He wanted me--a real person--to respond to Him in real love and real obedience. So He gave me freedom and I used it to say "no" to God. All of us have done that. We are sorry we often rebel. We wish we didn't. Our misused freedom brings brokenness into our lives. My sin affects you and yours affects me.

So one clue the Bible gives us about evil is that it doesn't come from some evil spirit or even from God--it comes from you--it comes from me. We have to be honest about that, don't we? Much of our misery is a result of our own sin and rebellion. Much of our tragedy is the result of selfish, sinful human beings who are reaping the result of the brokenness in human lives that have rebelled against God.

There is a second clue the Bible gives us. You see that Bible says that our sin spills over into our world. Our sinfulness, our rebellion, our disobedience affects our whole world and the Bible says we live in a fallen universe. We see floods that destroy whole towns, mud slides that wipe out a village, two cards

The injury was so serious that he was unable to leave his room until the bridge was finished. But there in his room he worked out the details of the plan with his wife acting as courier between himself and those in charge of construction. When the bridge was finished, they carried him on a stretcher so that he could see the finished product. Anxiously he studied the great bridge, from the tall piers to the great cables that held the suspension section. Then he smiled and said, "It is just like the plan."

Now we cannot always see God's plan for us. Sometimes in the midst of sorrow or pain or hurt or despair we cry out and wonder if God is on the job. But if we trust him and if we love Jesus who is our redemption, God is at work in everything that life brings us. And then someday we will be permitted to look at the finished product. Then we will be able to smile and say, "Now I see. It is just like the plan."