

## The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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### ***Perfectly Good Eyes that Can't See the Truth***

*Ezekiel 18.1-4; John 9.1-41*

Russ Dean, March 2, 2008



“*Who sinned that this man was born blind?*” I hear the question frequently. I’m not sure people know they’re asking it, but the question behind this question is implied by so much I hear people say. The basic question being asked is, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”<sup>1</sup> What divine purpose is being revealed? What divine judgment is being enacted? What divine power is on display? Many Jews of the day lived by the explicit belief that God blessed and cursed humanity, with prosperity on the one hand and plague on the other. Their well-known saying made this clear: “When the parents eat sour grapes, their children taste a sour taste, too” – God’s punishment for sin will be born, if even by innocent generations.

I have no doubt, despite the centuries that separate us, that this same theology is engrained in the souls of many Americans. We don’t ask the question this way. When I hear it, it’s more subtle than this, often coming as a statement of faith, not in the form of a question at all. I’d be willing to say half of you have heard it even in the last week. (Maybe you’ve said it yourself.) The question, as I hear it commonly restated sounds like this: “There’s a reason... I know everything happens for a reason.” Have you heard it? I’m sure (I hope) most people have not thought through the implications of such a theology. Katheryn Darr says such a statement “reflects a resignation to immutable cosmic rules of cause and effect.”<sup>2</sup> Why do things happen, good and bad... it’s because God is out there, pulling the strings (quite literally), intervening at whim to bless and curse, to answer prayers and not answer prayers, to respond and turn a blind

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<sup>1</sup>This is an obvious allusion to Rabbi Kushner’s best-selling book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, which I quote later in the sermon.

<sup>2</sup> In her commentary Katheryn Darr is actually quoting D.I. Block in his, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24* (p.561). Darr’s commentary is found in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, “Ezekiel,” p.1257.

eye. When the bad happens and they say, “There’s a reason,” what they are saying is that God did this, either acting willfully, or willfully not acting. And when the good is claimed, it’s the same thing: God did this for me (no matter what this implies about all the others who have not been as fortunate).

As I understand it, this is the same old, bad theology Ezekiel preached against in Babylon, nearly 2600 years ago. (Even though he said then, “*The proverb shall be used no more*,” we have apparently learned nothing [we’re still using it!]) It is the same fear-filled view of God Jesus was trying to correct 20 centuries ago.

About a year ago I was talking casually to a father on a baseball field. The teenage son of a colleague had just been tragically killed in a car accident. I had read about the accident, which involved too much speed and too much alcohol. (The reason?) This father, whom I did not know well, but who knew I was a minister, declared with complete confidence: “It’s a tragedy. But I firmly believe everything happens for a reason.” Do you hear it? *Who sinned that this man was born blind...* or that this young man was punished in this way. What he really said is, “Yeah, this young man got a bad deal – but God did this.” (We may not understand the reason, but that’s the reason.)

The preacher of Ecclesiastes claims, “*For everything there is a season...*” (Ecclesiastes 3.1). Human beings, though, seem to have an incessant need to assign a divine reason – a purpose, a cause – for everything. (I didn’t review the theology of Ecclesiastes for this sermon, but I think this theology, which acknowledges the inevitability of good and bad, the bittersweet nature of life itself, is different from one which assigns a God-caused purpose to everything.)

If you listen to people's theology, you hear all sorts of things. (What they are really stating in this instance is their theodicy – their understanding of why bad things can happen if there is a good God loose in the world.) But it all comes down to the belief that God is responsible. In this Lenten series, we're considering our failures in being whom God calls us to be, and we first joined the flamboyant "Geraldine" in blaming the Devil. Then we claimed ignorance. And last week, we blamed the nature of change itself, acknowledging our apathy (I just don't want to change). Today, we come round to crediting all the good, no matter how self-centered the claim, and all the bad, no matter how wicked – on God.

"There is a reason for everything." Really?

In his excellent book on this subject, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Harold Kushner, relates too many examples of this theology from his own ministry as a Rabbi. A college girl dies of a tragic brain aneurism and her parents, non-active members of the Rabbi's synagogue, conclude that her death is the result of their failure to observe the traditional fast on the recent celebration of Yom Kippur. How many people still live with such a mentality of God – that God, out there, who dishes out punishment, and hands out rewards, with a reckless, but divine abandon? How many? How many of us, when tragedy comes, fall back on that faulty logic – "God must have his reasons?" And how many give God direct credit for the healing or the pay raise or the answer to a selfishly-prayed prayer, without realizing the implications of doing so? If Jesus helped Curt Warner win the Super Bowl a decade ago, as the superstar quarterback said, who was playing for the other team? And how did Curt draft Jesus to begin with, with all the equally fervent prayers going up from the other sideline!?<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Kushner says,

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<sup>3</sup> Kurt Warner led the St. Louis Rams to victory in Super Bowl XXXIV.

All the responses to tragedy... have at least one thing in common. They all assume that God is the cause of our suffering, and they try to understand why God would want us to suffer. Is it for our own good, or is it a punishment we deserve, or could it be that God does not care what happens to us? Many of the answers [are] sensitive and imaginative, but none [is] totally satisfying. Some [lead] us to blame ourselves in order to spare God's reputation. Others [ask] us to deny reality or to repress our true feelings. We [are] left either hating ourselves for deserving such a fate, or hating God for sending it to us when we did not deserve it.<sup>4</sup>

I think the same can be said, in a reciprocal fashion, about crediting God with direct intervention, on our behalf, and all the good that comes to us. The result being that we are left with an inflated sense of self (look what God has done for me), or despising those who are not as fortunate (for the less privileged are obviously the ones God has ignored or chastised).

Now before I go on, I need to add a parenthesis to this sermon, as Amy did two weeks ago. I want to tell you in no uncertain terms that I do believe God is active in this world and in our lives; the Psalmist says, *a present help in time of trouble* (Psalm 46.1). And I believe God is the source of all good. I affirm with the writer of James, in a broad and general sense, "*Every good and perfect gift is from above*" (James 1.17). It is appropriate, then, for people to give thanks to God for abundance. As the German mystic, Meister Eckhart once said, if the only prayer we ever pray is "Thank you, God – it is enough." For this is a prayer of our deepest heart. But I think it is possible to do so without implying that God is manipulating all the good and all the bad, and our relationship with God is simply an attempt to coerce God's manipulation in favor of us.<sup>5</sup> Do you hear the difference in saying: "There's a reason mama got healed!" And, "I am grateful my mother is well. Thank God!" Do you hear the difference? The first statement

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<sup>4</sup> *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, p.29.

<sup>5</sup> In his book, *Meditations*, Thomas Moore says: "All the classical things that have been said about prayer are true – petition, praise, adoration, communion, conversation. But one's notion of God and divinity has to be sufficiently empty, its mystery sufficiently accounted for, or else prayer becomes exploitation of the divine" (p.69).

implies something about an explicit choice of God – on your behalf – and it implies something I’m not willing to say about all the mothers who did not get their healing. God is with us. God is Good. Thanks be to God. (Thus endeth the parenthesis.)

Jesus’ disciples want to know the reason this man is blind. Understand – they know who did it. They just want to know why. Jesus’ answer, and the story told around this healing is instructive, if our perfectly good eyes can see the truth!<sup>6</sup> Jesus says, “*Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.*” If you listen, you can hear Ezekiel’s old prophecy in Jesus’ words, “*This proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel...*” The man’s blindness is NOT punishment. There is no reason.<sup>7</sup>

But we have to listen carefully, not to go away from either text with the wrong message, enforcing the very idea I’m hoping we’ll learn to disabuse. Ezekiel says, in the words of God: *all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child... it is only the person who sins that shall die.* Please do not hear in this text: God will punish you for your sin. Ezekiel’s theology is a theology of practical reason, and Grace – death is the consequence of sin. Not the punishment of God. *The person who sins shall die.* The consequence of sin, large and small, is death, large and small. Figuratively. Literally. As Anne Lamott concisely puts it, “We are

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<sup>6</sup> This reference, and the title of the sermon, is a direct quotation from the issue of “The Christian Century,” containing the March 2 commentary, “Living by the Word.” Unfortunately, I have misplaced my copy of the Century and cannot recall the author’s name!

<sup>7</sup> As Rabbi Kushner notes, this is simply more than some people can handle – this idea that the universe is so chaotic or random that things happen, literally, with no “purpose” or “cause.” It seems an inevitable conclusion, however, given a scientific understanding of the world. Science does not, for me, supercede the view of faith which insists the world is more than can be proven by empirical evidence, but must be taken quite seriously by Christians living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To acknowledge the terms “random” and “chance,” which are important in the current scientific understanding of the evolution of the universe, does not negate the presence of God in that world. I hold to a view (which I cannot articulate fully) which maintains that God (and God alone) gives “purpose” to an otherwise random, or “purposeless,” universe.

punished by our sin, not for our sin.”<sup>8</sup> Each person stands on his or her own. And, yes, there are consequences to the choices we make. God simply gives us the freedom to live and die those consequences – while walking beside us every step of the journey. The prophecy of Ezekiel was a breath of Grace-filled air, to a theology that was superstitious and filled the people with a stifling fear of an all-controlling God of reward and retribution. Let us hear it that way today.

And in Jesus’ response, do not hear: God made the man blind so Jesus could heal him, which would just justify the blindness in the first place. Paul affirms in his letter to the Romans that God is in all things, working for good. My own translation of the Greek says something like “God is the energy that has the potential to bring all things, even bad things, to some good outcome.”<sup>9</sup> But Paul does not say, nor is Jesus saying here, God causes the bad, in order to make God look better in the end. Wouldn’t that be an ego-centric way to design the world? Even for God?

I believe Jesus is saying to the disciples, there is no before-hand “reason.” The man was just born blind. It happens. Even 21<sup>st</sup> century medical science does not fully understand why. But even in the man’s blindness, Jesus is telling them, the presence of God can be known. In this incident, the man’s blindness is healed. Thank God! But there is an even deeper story. It has to do with the blindness of all those who have perfectly good eyes, and cannot see. Will not see that God is in all things – even a man named Jesus. That God is working for good – even in a man

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<sup>8</sup> Lamotte’s quotation is actually, “They say we are not punished for the sin but by the sin,” though I have no idea who “they” is. *Traveling Mercies*, p.128.

<sup>9</sup> I think Romans 8.28 is a highly important verse for our understanding of the providence or work of God among us – but one that is too often misunderstood, enforcing this idea that God “causes all things to happen” (so that God can work for good to overcome them). I am hardly a Greek scholar, but the Greek phrase says, “*panta* (all things) *sunergei* (works together) *eis agathon* (into good).” You can see the English cognate “energy” in the Greek *sunergei*. This understanding seems to me to work quite well with a current scientific view which acknowledges “fields” or energies which connect the universe, literally, though in still-to-be-understood ways. As the writer of the book of Ephesians puts it, “*There is one body and one Spirit... one God... who is above all and through all and in all* (4.4-6).

born blind. The deeper story, with more important ramifications for us today,<sup>10</sup> is the hard hearts and the closed minds of all those people who knew God had caused this. Who had their tidy answers. Their compact theologies. Their sure affirmations. And they could not, would not, open their eyes to see God working – but in a deeper way.

Jesus heals the man and the gospel affirms that in this, *God... [was] revealed*. But there are other endings to this story that also affirm the work of God.<sup>11</sup> If we read the text in a very literal fashion, we come to another truth that a mature faith must learn to affirm. *He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him*. It does not say, “So God's works might be revealed in his healing.” Do you get it? Sometimes people get healed. Thank God! But more often than not, much more often, in fact, God's works are revealed in the life of the one who lives blind – who does not get a divine miracle, yet can see, anyway. We need to open our perfectly good eyes, quit demanding that God work only in miracles of divine intervention. And we need to quit blaming God, if only subconsciously, when we get a bad deal in life.

Bad things just happen – and God is revealed not just when they get reversed, but when we can see God, the life-sustaining Presence of God, the joy-inspiring Grace of God, the real and paradoxical Goodness of God in the good and the bad, in the bitter and the sweet.

When the good comes, let us not thoughtlessly credit the actual hand of God working on our behalf. And when the bad befalls us, let us not blame God. Let us learn to gracefully receive whatever lot we are cast, knowing that God will be with us, come what may.

Jesus said, *I came into this world... that those who do not see may see...*

May it be so!

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<sup>10</sup> Because Jesus is not literally walking among us to affect healings.

<sup>11</sup> By this I mean all the other stories of the blind (or the lame or the poor, etc...) which do not end with a miraculous healing, a happy ending.