



September 2017

Dear Friends and Partners of CWR/PTM,

During Jesus' earthly ministry, it was commonly believed that those who suffered and those who experienced catastrophic disasters were being punished for their sin. But the gospel of Jesus Christ insists neither physical disasters and suffering nor welfare and assets are indications of a person's inferior or superior spiritual standing with God.

The Gospel of Luke (Luke 13:1-8) tells us of some Galilean Jews who had recently come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to God at the temple. Pilate, the procurator of the province of Judea, with full power of life and death, the same Pilate who tortured and crucified Jesus, barbarically killed these Jewish pilgrims and mixed their blood with that of the animals they sacrificed. The slaughter of these Jewish pilgrims was a horrendous "news" story, and of course, given popular wisdom, inspired some debate: *These pilgrims weren't on vacation, living it up with wine, women and song. They were paying homage to and worshipping God—this is what they get? WHY?*

Jesus asked his disciples (Luke 13:2), "Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?" It was a rhetorical question—of course these Galileans were not the worst of the worst, but they suffered anyway. WHY?

Jesus then reminded his disciples about *another current Jerusalem news story*—eighteen construction workers, many of them undoubtedly family men, were tragically crushed to death when the tower in Siloam they were working on collapsed on them. **WHY?** Once again Jesus asked his disciples (Luke 13:4, The Message Bible) "...do you think they were worse citizens than all other Jerusalemites?" And the answer to the question Jesus posed was obvious again—*of course these construction workers were not worse citizens than everyone else in Jerusalem. Their suffering was not directly related to a penalty they deserved.*

In both cases Jesus told the disciples to "repent"—to re-order their beliefs and perspectives, because if they only had hope in this life in the here-and-now, then they too would perish without hope in similar, meaningless ways. **Catastrophic suffering can bring both victims and bystanders together, in a common call to repent, to dedicate and re-dedicate what remains of earthly life to Jesus Christ, for this mortal life is at best brief and tenuous.**

A further lesson we might learn from this passage in Luke 13 is that it is ill-advised and presumptuous to rush to judgment—superstitiously assuming the suffering of others is a spiritual penalty they owe is a fool's errand. *Engaging in smug religious judgments ignores the fact that time and chance happen to all.* We struggle to make sense of our own predicaments—we can't even answer all of the "WHY" questions about our own life, so how can someone else judge our circumstances— and, conversely, how can we accurately judge theirs? Paul asked "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls" (Romans 14:4).

When we factor the gospel of the kingdom of God into the question "**WHY SUFFERING?**" we realize that today, in this 21st century, even though the gospel is transforming lives, there are still

terrorists, child molesters, tyrants and mass murderers (C.S. Lewis estimated that about 80% of all suffering was caused by humans). *No guarantees are given for us as Christ-followers that the physical circumstances we encounter will be any better than those of anyone else.*

Brutal and inhuman bloodletting like that experienced by the Galileans still happens. Buildings still collapse without warning, just as the tower in Siloam did. Shoddy construction, errors in design and non-existent earthquake codes are a fact of life. There is no direct connection, says the gospel, between personal sin and all culpability and suffering. *God does not keep a scorecard, so that when our sins exceed a certain level he directs others to cause suffering in our lives—nor does he always engineer events in such a way to ensure we “get what’s coming to us.”*

As Brennan Manning said in his book, *The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus*, “Jesus makes no effort to exonerate God from the scandal of suffering, to bail him out, to rationalize or minimize the presence of tragedy in his world.” Jesus never explained “why suffering.” Again as Manning said, “Never once did Jesus ask those who wanted to join the company of his friends if they were chaste, honest, sober or respectable. Never once did he attempt to charm anyone to his service with promises of happiness. On the contrary, with uncompromising honesty, he said, ‘If anyone will come after me, let him take up his cross...’”

The scientific discipline called “chaos theory” presumes that some things in this life are unpredictable—and try as we might to understand “random” results, we cannot. As you have probably heard, a butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon might affect weather over Kansas. There are so many variables, so many patterns of behavior and so many huge and complex components of life that things might seem chaotic and random to us.

There are many aspects of life that we can no more understand than a fish can fully fathom (pun intended) the water in which it swims. Our vision and insight is limited to the goldfish bowl in which we swim, obstructed by that “dark glass” that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 13:12 (King James Version). **WHY DO THINGS HAPPEN AS THEY DO—AND WHY DON’T THINGS HAPPEN HOW/WHEN WE HOPE OR THINK THEY SHOULD???**

There’s a story of a man who was the lone survivor of a shipwreck. He washed up on a small, uninhabited island, and every day he cried out to God to save him. He felt that God surely must have had some “plan” to rescue him since he was the only survivor of the shipwreck. Every day he scanned the horizon, searching in vain for a rescue party. He constructed a small grass hut, but then one day, as he came back from a long day searching for food on land and sea, he found his hut in flames. Smoke was rolling up to the sky. He was angry and filled with grief, and screamed at God. “**WHY?**” The next day he woke up and looked out to sea and saw a ship nearing his deserted island. When the rescuers came ashore he asked them, “How did you know I was here?” They said, “We saw your smoke signal.”

We’ll never fully answer all the WHY questions satisfactorily—God never promised such a thing. He does promise never to leave us. He promises to always be with us. But we often have no idea *how* exactly God is helping us, or when he will more directly help us (as we would like). Sometimes we look back in retrospect and hindsight and realize that *while we thought our hut burning down was a disaster it was actually the first stage of our rescue.* God helps us in ways we do not expect. We don’t know the future, but we can know and trust that God is with us—**yesterday, today and forever.**

Suffering does not discriminate—nor are we always able to determine what could have prevented suffering. Sometimes we make choices that lead to suffering, and sometimes we endure suffering even though we had no choices to make.

For example, think of your family and your parents. We don't choose our parents do we? We don't choose the country into which we are born, nor do we choose the socio-economic standing of our parents or how many siblings we will have (if any). When children are born they are unaware of the language their parents speak nor do they choose the religion their parents prefer, or in many cases the religion their parents have inherited.

It is not uncommon today, as it was when Jesus walked this earth, to believe that suffering is God's penalty for sin—many pastors within Christendom feed those they lead astray with the contrived comfort food of health and wealth that, they say, will come to those who obey God.

Within Christendom there are those who would have us believe that God has a plan for virtually all aspects of our lives. But this is superstitious, silly, religious thinking—God is not directly involved in seeing to it that we pay a penalty. There are natural laws that, like gravity, always follow when actions are undertaken. I didn't learn very much in high school physics, but I do remember that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Jesus directs our thoughts away from definitively determining WHY we or others suffer, and instead he acts in our lives so that compassion (not blame and condemnation) is what we share with others. Jesus directs our thoughts away from the random senselessness of physical life toward the forever abiding love of God, which we share, by his grace.

In the aftermath of the two catastrophic news stories at that time, Jesus challenged his disciples to “repent” (Luke 13:3, 5). When we hear of horrendous suffering it's natural to be thankful we are not suffering in a similar way, but *Jesus cautions that no one should conclude that God loves them more because they are not enduring the suffering others are*. He urges compassion and he issues a call to “repent”—so that in the aftermath of suffering (either our own or that of others) we “repent” (change) so that we dedicate and re-dedicate our lives to God, re-prioritizing our lives to make the most and the best of however much time we have left on this good earth.

We know that Jesus is with us, next to us and in us as we follow him—though there are many “WHY” questions we will never answer to our satisfaction on this side of eternity. Thanks for your partnership in sharing your prayers and your financial gifts with this ongoing work—what a pleasure it is to proclaim Jesus, around this world!

In Christ,



Greg Albrecht
President, Plain Truth Ministries

P.S. Here's a note of gratitude from someone in Finland who is being blessed by CWR/PTM—this ministry which you help to provide with your faithful offerings and prayers. THANK YOU!

I've been listening to your radio reaching ministry (CWR audio) for a while now, and it is really a blessing to me. You've been helping me in my struggle to live in a closer relationship with “Pa” in Jesus, in grace, which I desperately need. Keep up your good work.

CWR/PTM Prayer List—September 2017

These requests for prayer represent just a few of the thousands we receive and pray for. We invite you to join us in praying for these and the others that space does not permit us to include here. Thanks for joining with us as a CWR/PTM Prayer Partner.

Please pray for my son who is trapped in a personality disorder. He needs balance and God's peace.—Florida

Please pray for peace in our family as we settle our mother's estate and plan for her memorial service.—California

Please pray for healing and comfort for a friend who has bladder cancer.—Colorado

Please pray for my husband who has heart problems. Thank you for your prayers.—Ohio

Please pray for my wife, who is 80 years old—she's had a constant cough for months. She also fell and broke her hip, and she's slowly recovering from that.—Wisconsin

Please pray that I can take care of my dad, who will be 95 soon, even though I suffer from arthritis.—Michigan

Please pray for my husband who has prostate problems, that he will be given healing and emotional peace.—Texas

Please continue to pray for the healing of my colon and lungs.—Virginia

Please pray for my friend (age 88) who must now live in a nursing home due to her frail condition. Pray that God will help her adjust to the loss of independence and stay positive.—Maryland

I am having severe back problems. Please pray for my doctor to find the problem and know how to fix it.—Georgia

Please pray for my son who has severe pain in his stomach and back.—California

Please pray for two fellow Christian friends (husband and wife) who have physical and financial problems.—Arkansas

Please pray for my niece's daughter who is going through proton treatment for cancer.—Mississippi

My brother has numb feet and legs—side effects from an operation. Please pray for his feeling to return.—Maryland

Please pray for my prostate to be healed and for relief from sleep apnea.—Wisconsin

Please pray that I will be an effective servant of God to do His will as I respond to people when they talk to me.—Florida

Please pray for those who are in jail and mental institutions that they may know the true ministry of Jesus Christ.—Georgia

Pray for my son, his wife and me as we join households. They're living in my home and renting to their son.—Minnesota

One of my sons had knee surgery and my older son just had hip replacement surgery last week. Both are doing great. I thank God and all of you for the prayers.—Kentucky

Please pray for me—I am suffering from Lyme disease and high blood pressure.—Maryland

Please pray for my husband who has had several strokes. He is currently in rehab and is having a hard time.—Alabama

I had surgery on my eye and it won't heal properly. The other is damaged from a fall. Please pray for healing.—Indiana

Please pray for our back problems and spiritual strength in times of economic downturn.—Louisiana

Dear God: We bring you many requests and needs. You know each of these individuals, and we thank you in advance for the answers you will provide for each request. With thanksgiving for your love and grace, we pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—Amen.