

## **“When Christians Get it Wrong—When Bad Things Happen”**

So picture this: A man was being tailgated by a stressed out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection, dropping her cell phone and makeup.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and put in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, an officer went back to the cell and opened the door. The woman was escorted back to the booking desk where the officer who arrested her was waiting with her personal effects. He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' License plate holder, the 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' bumper Sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally I assumed you had stolen the car."

Today we continue in a series of sermons we started last week, **"When Christians Get it Wrong."** We're looking at the research of the Barna Group and David Kinnaman. Many people are opting out of the church and Christianity and he has found out several important reasons that we're addressing. He's found that people are actually drawn to Jesus, but they're repelled by Christians. So we're trying to understand what these people, particularly, young adults, might say to us that would help us be better Christ followers. For those of you who are a part of this group that has opted out, we are hoping to remove some of the roadblocks that might keep you from being a Christian.

Today we're looking how we Christians can get it wrong as it relates to when bad things happen. And I want to start by asking you to do something very difficult. I'm asking you today to look at your assumptions; to question your assumptions. Because we all make lots of assumptions about God's relationship to suffering, so let's look very closely at those.

I want to start by letting you hear from John Bamford who is in his 20s. He grew up going to church but he now has a very strong dislike of Christianity. John is an Army Airborne Ranger who returned recently from Iraq. He was in the first 200 people on the ground in Afghanistan in October, 2001. Then in March of 2003 he was a part of the invading force that went into Iraq. John has eight reasons why he is not a Christian. I want you to listen as he explained the number one reason why he is not a Christian.

So this is the question: Why did God kill my friend? When you hear this question you have to listen for what's going on in the mind of the person who's asking it. They're saying: *"You as Christians tell me that everything happens for a reason. If everything happens for a reason, then when my friend John died, he died because God intended for him to die because it was a part of God's master plan. Even though he was killed by an Iraqi bullet, it was ultimately God who decided that he would die. God killed my friend, and you want me to trust in him and to love him and to serve him? I don't think so."*

When we say that everything happens for a reason, as well-meaning as we are in saying that, we are saying that whatever happened was because God wanted it to happen. That's a hard thing to hear when you are feeling the pain of loss. It's hard to hear about a loving God, much less about serving that God, when the logical conclusion is that God planned for and intended for you to lose your friend, sister, mother or father or child.

It is one thing to struggle with this question yourself as a Christian and there's pain or suffering in your life. It is another thing how we talk to others who are in the midst of suffering. Listen to this woman's experience.

*"Our baby died this past spring when he was six weeks old. So many Christians that we have encountered since that time tell us, "This was God's plan." Before this tragic event I guess I thought that is how life worked too. But there is no way that the death of an innocent six week old baby, and then our inability to get pregnant later, was a part of some master plan. If it is, then I'm simply not interested in the God that has that plan".*

See the challenge facing someone in this situation? It's a challenge that people have tried to figure out for centuries. I don't have it all figured out but I think I've made progress. I want to invite you to question some assumptions with me in the next few minutes.

**Let's look at this assumption that God controls everything that happens.** We often say that God is in control, but what does this mean? We often talk about this in the context of suffering.

What about when someone gets cancer? When a cell in your body goes haywire and starts to reproduce. There are about a trillion cells in your body. Is God controlling everything that happens in every single one of those cells, 24 hours a day, seven days a week for all 7 billion people on this planet? Or even beyond the cellular level at the atomic level, is God controlling every single thing that happens at the atomic level all the time, in everything? And we're not just talking about our planet but also in the entire universe. In the 400 billion plus stars in the Milky Way galaxy, and then the 200 billion other galaxies in our universe, every atom, every moment God is monitoring and controlling? Is that what we mean when we say that God is in control?

Is God in control of the stock market? Does it go up or down based on the will of God every day? Is God in control of the weather patterns so that every time the wind blows it's because God made it so? Is every lightning strike and where it strikes because God determined it ahead of time? Does God determine every tornado and every hurricane and every rainstorm and every drought? Does God really micromanage all these things?

Is God in control of how you drive your car and how someone else drives their car and if someone runs into your car? In my hometown, Warrensburg, last week a 91 year old woman was robbed in her own home and strangled. Then whoever did it tried to burn her house down. Did God control that?

You get the idea. A lot of people simply assume that this is how it works. When you put it that way, if God is in control of everything then we are all simply marionettes, puppets on a string. God determines everything, what you do, what you eat, what you where, when you go to the bathroom. It's all planned. The Chiefs are playing today. Is the outcome already set? My wife would say "Yes, the Chiefs are going to lose!" But if the outcome is already set, what's the point of playing the game? Is that really how life works? If it is then the question is: what's the point? Why do anything if it is already been fixed? If we're just puppets? Question the assumptions that go along with that line of reasoning.

I have come to a place where I don't think that God has predetermined and fixed everything. I don't think that everything happens because it is God's will. It seems to me that when I read the Bible, the Bible is teaching us just the opposite. Most of what happened in the Bible is the story of human beings doing what God does not want us to do and then God trying to fix it.

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is partly about how God gave them a choice. He put a tree in there they weren't supposed to eat from. God created boundaries and gave them guidance, but he let them choose. That's meant to teach us that God allows us to make choices. God allows us to play a role in determining what will happen in the future, even when that hurts God and even when it hurts ourselves, even when it's not what God wants to see happen. We need to question our assumptions when it comes to how we look at God and what it means to say that God is in control.

**What about in the face of a natural disaster?** How do we as Christians respond to that? When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast 1,800 people died. Tens of thousands of people lost everything they had. It did more damage than any hurricane that had ever hit the United States. Just after Hurricane Katrina hit a Christian by that name of David Crowe published an essay that was used by many people. Here's what he wrote.

*Many thoughtful Americans are asking, "Why did this happen?" There is an answer to this question... The answer is found in understanding that man is not in control. God is! Everything in the sky, the sea and on earth is subject to His control.*

*Psalms 107:25-33 says, "He raiseth the stormy wind which lifted up the waves of the sea... He turns rivers into a desert, and springs of water into a thirsty ground; a fruitful land into a salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who dwell in it."*

*Was there wickedness in New Orleans, Alabama and Mississippi? Well, let's see. There was the burgeoning Gulf Coast gambling industry, with a new casino that was to open on Labor Day weekend. And*

*then there was the 34th Annual gay, lesbian and transgender "Southern Decadence" Labor Day gala...Further, there is the well-known corruption, drugs, and immoral playground of the French Quarter, Bourbon Street, and New Orleans itself...*

Crowe concludes that Hurricane Katrina was an act of God to punish the people of that region for all of these things that he names. There were other vocal Christians who chimed in with this kind of cause and effect as people tried to figure out why God did this.

But we have to ask several questions after hearing this line of reasoning. Why was the French Quarter virtually untouched and still standing after the hurricane if it was one of God's targets? Do you remember that within two days the bars opened up again on Bourbon Street? That doesn't make any sense to me. Thousands of Bible believing Christians had their homes wiped out and lost everything but the French Quarter is still standing and Bourbon Street can open up within hours?

Why was it that a disproportionate number of people who lost everything were the poor? The Bible tells us clearly that God has a special affinity for the poor so how does this fit?

Why was it that the casinos were some of the first businesses open again and they had their best year ever on record in the Gulf Coast in 2007 because there was nothing else for people to do except to go and gamble? It seems to me this is a strange way of understanding why Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast.

Here are some pictures of people hit by Katrina. People died. Many of these families lost their dreams. Many of them are followers of Jesus. Let me ask you a simple question. Did God do this to them for a reason or to teach them some sort of lesson? Is this the way God works? Was this God's punishment on the people in this area?

Last week we looked at how Jesus hung around with and ate dinner with prostitutes, and pushers, and sinners, and gamblers. He didn't wipe out their homes. I think we need to question the assumptions.

Whether it's a hurricane, or a child with cancer, or a car accident that causes a tragic death, sometimes we say that suffering happens because God wants to teach us something. Sometimes we say that suffering happens because it is part of God's plan and we just can't see what that plan is yet. Sometimes we say that there is suffering because God is punishing us. Sometimes we say it's the devil that does these things. So did God do it or did the devil do it? Is it because I am a good person and God wants to build character in me or is the devil getting me because I did something wrong? How do we sort these things out?

In order to sort this out I think it's helpful to look at what God is like in the Scriptures. We see things like this from the Old Testament **"The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him"** (Daniel 9:9, NIV). The Psalmist wrote, **"But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness"** (Psalm 86:15, NIV). The prophet Joel writes this: **"Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity"** (Joel 2:13, NIV).

Jesus had mercy on sinners, he didn't destroy them. Yes he called them to change their ways. But he did not crush them.

When we look at scripture, we see God is just, loving, kind, merciful, reaches out to sinners, forgives sinners and wants to save them from themselves. The Bible teaches us that God is like a father and we are his children. If God is all of those things then whatever you say that God has done has to line up with those things.

I mean, if you wanted to teach your children something would you inject their body with cancer cells to teach them something? I'm guessing that none of you would do that. If you wanted to teach a child something would you ram a car into the side of their car and nearly killed them? I'm pretty sure none of us would do that. If we did that we'd be arrested and put in jail. If we would not do that then why would we say that God would do these things? I believe that whatever God does do in our lives will be consistent with his love, his grace, his mercy and his character which is just. Can you question the assumptions?

Here is maybe the more challenging question. **If God is loving and just and kind then why doesn't he at least stop these bad things from happening?** If God has the power to stop these things from happening and he is loving then why doesn't he stop it? That's a really important question. I have wrestled with that question over and over again.

Some people have answered that by saying that God created all that is and then stepped back completely. That God does not intervene in the world because if God intervened in some circumstances that would throw everything off. God watches and cares about us, but does not interfere. That's called Deism.

The problem with that view is that I think that God does interact with us, we call that guidance, or nudges, or leadings. And sometimes directly intervenes. Those times are called miracles. They don't happen very often, but I've seen enough of them to where it's clear that sometimes God steps in. Why in some cases and not in others, I don't know. But in some cases he heals people miraculously, or protects people in terrible accidents, or keeps them from harm, or gives them solutions to difficult problems. I don't know why sometimes and not others.

But listen, I didn't become a Christian because I thought that if I became a Christian that God would let me live to be 100 and I would never get sick and nothing bad will ever happen to my children and nothing bad would ever happen to me. I became a Christian because I really do believe there is a loving God. I think he has a dream for how we are to live our lives. I feel more authentically human when I'm following God and when I am living for Jesus Christ. And, when I go through bad times, I find strength trusting in him. No matter what happens.

So, as Christians, when tragedy happens, what do we do? What should we say? There was a woman whose husband was diagnosed with cancer and he had to get treatment in another city. They had two young children and not only was her husband fighting cancer but her mother had dementia and was in the last days of her life. How do you get through a time like that? How do you make it through each day and hold it all together when the bottom has fallen out? You get through it when Christians around you get it right. As she wrote in this e-mail:

*"...They send prayers through e-mail. They send silly cards and letters to the hospital to cheer you up. They move into your home literally and care for your children. They bring meals to you. They take your child to the emergency room at midnight. They help you assemble a Christmas gift for your children at 10 PM on Christmas Eve because they know you can't do it by yourself. They travel over 1000 miles to hold your hand when you are alone and waiting with uncertainty. They give you gift cards for gas and for food. They offer to be with your dying mother until you can get there. They buy you a tree to plant in her memory when she passes. They give you hope, courage and strength when you can't seem to find your own way. My family has been touched by Christians who get it right and we can never repay all of the people who were at our side, and they don't want us to. They did it out of love. They did it because they were Christians and that's what Christians do."*

That's what Christians do. I want to encourage us to be those kinds of people, those kinds of Christians. And as a people see us in that light, not giving pat answers to difficult questions, but simply being loving and compassionate in the face of adversity, they will see the living Christ. The Latin root of compassion means to suffer with. To suffer with people. We stand by them. Paul tells us in the New Testament that we are the Body of Christ. We are the physical incarnation of Jesus in the world. We are his presence here. When God wants to do something in the world he doesn't typically intervene miraculously. Instead he sends people to accomplish his purposes. That's our task. Our task is to suffer with people and to be his hands and his voice in the world. When we do that in the face of tragedy people might see him and might be drawn to him. Not repelled from him. And for today that is Good News along the way.

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