

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: God with Me

Lesson: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

¹⁸ My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick. ¹⁹ Listen! The cry of the daughter of my people from far and wide in the land: "Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" ("Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?")

*²⁰ "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." ²¹ For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken, I mourn, and horror has seized me. ²² Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? **9** O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!*

There is birth and death in our life. All human beings are born, grow, and return to God at the appointed time. This is our fate. No one will be able to deny this. But even if we know this, sometimes our hearts don't accept what we know. Especially, when the sudden death of our loved ones, sudden accidents, and sudden illnesses happen to us, the very foundation of our lives and even the foundation of our faith is shaken. Especially in the case of Christians who serve the church diligently, do hard work at the church, and don't miss offerings and tithes, when bad things happen in their lives, they may feel deeply hurt, betrayed by God, and resentful.

(Slide 1) Today I would like to introduce a book to you. The title of the book is 'When Bad Things Happen to Good People.' This book is very old, but it is one of the must-read books for Christians. Harold S. Kushner, the author, is a Jewish Rabbi. His son Aaron was born into the blessing of the people. However, Harold noticed that his son didn't gain any weight after 8 months, and when his son turned 1 year old his hair started to fall out, so he took him to the doctor. After several complex tests, the doctor informed him that his son's disease was progeria. Progeria is known as a 'quickly aging disease'. The doctor added that his son wouldn't grow more than three feet tall, and because he had no hair or hair on his body, he would look like a very small old man at a young age, and he would also die in adolescence.

After hearing the doctor's explanation, his eyes darkened. He believed that he had been good and that he had been trying to walk the right path and that he

had lived a much more reverent life than most people. However, after he heard the doctor's explanation of his son, he could only think, 'Lord, why me? why are you giving me such a tragedy?', 'Have I sinned against You?' I'm living a good life, but Lord, why me? Why my son?' This book is about the process of embracing the death of his son after losing him.

Questions such as “Why do bad things happen to me, or my family?” are questions that most Christians would have, and I was asked such a question by a member’s family when I visited them. Their question was a little more specific. “Pastor, the parishioner has been suffering from this disease for over ten years. Did God give the parishioner the disease?” They looked tired and sad from the parishioner’s long illness. What words could comfort them?

Today's lesson is from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah's time was a time of great political instability in Israel. Babylon continued to put pressure on Israel. They made Israel pay tribute, and they were culturally and politically involved in Israel. Even they made Israel believe in the idols they believed in. Finally, Babylon invaded Israel and took some of the Israelites captive.

Then Jeremiah says: “My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick.” (18) And he hears the cry and sorrow of the Israelites captured by Babylon: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” (19)

(Slide 2) At that time, the Israelites believed that there was God in Zion and that God was protecting Zion. For example, let's read Psalm 46:4-7: “⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. ⁵God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. ⁶The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice; the earth melts. ⁷The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*”

At one time, people believed that God was in Zion and He was protecting the city of God, but now they are crying and saying that God is no longer in Zion and that He doesn't protect them. Thus, Jeremiah sigh for grief for Israel and Israel also sighs for grief. And God sighed and said: “Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?” (19)

(Slide 3) In traditional Christianity, God has been understood as the controlling power. But if God is the controlling power, we may have some questions like ‘why do bad things happen to us?’, ‘how can we understand and accept the tragic accidents, tragic deaths, and tragic sorrows that occur in our lives?’ If God is the controlling power, we can only see that God gives us tragedy. In church, by the way, we say God is good all the time, but if God gives us bad things, we may experience a contradiction between God of love and God of punishment.

Jesus Christ says “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) But, this doesn’t mean that if we do not believe in God, and if we sin against God, He will punish us immediately and He will allow us tragedy. In Genesis, when Adam disobeyed God’s words, he was expelled from the Garden of Eden, but God made a garment of skin for him because God is God of love and God of forgiveness.

(Slide 4) God proclaims His love, sorrow, and compassion to Israel through Jeremiah. Rather than asking the Israelites to repent, Jeremiah empathizes with their grief. Jeremiah says: “²¹ For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken, I mourn, and horror has seized me. ²² Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? **9** O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! (8:21-9:1)

(Slide 5) Love has many meanings. For some, love is food. For some, love is services; for others, love is gifts. I have often said that love is forgiveness. And today I want to add one more meaning. Love is empathy. Love is to be at eye level with the other person. God loved us so much that He came to this earth to make eye-level with us, and God loved the poor, the sick, and the marginalized, and was born as a helpless baby in a lowly manger in Bethlehem. And he walked the way of the cross to forgive all the pain, suffering, sorrow, and sins of this world.

Through Jeremiah, God is telling us how God feels about Israel's suffering. Jeremiah's feeling is God's feeling.

God was with the people of Israel when they suffered and mourned, and God's heart was broken by their brokenness. God was weeping day and night like the fountain of tears when they suffer. What we can learn from God's empathy is that those who mourn need a person who mourns with them and empathize with their feelings, not advice, suggestion, or judgment.

Returning to the book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," the author embraced his son's death, and his son's illness, and he realized that his son's death wasn't from God, but rather, God was with them when they grieved, and he said that when he was discouraged by the loss, the Lord gave him the courage and strength to constantly raise up again.

Friends, we never know our life, so sometimes good things happen, and sometimes bad things happen that we can't accept. And bad things make us frustrated and discouraged, and sometimes we feel betrayed by the church and God. And we may ask God, "why me?"

And when we are in difficult situations, we must remember that the tragedy does not come from God, but rather, God is with us in the hard situations, weeping with us and empathizing with us, and giving us constant courage, hope, and the strength to rise again.

Friends, God loves you and is always willing to give you good things. When the foundation of your life is shaken; when the foundation of your faith is shaken by bad things that happened in your life, I want you to always remember this: God is with us now and He wants to give us courage and hope and the new strength to raise up again, and that He always loves us. Amen.