

Suffering

We saw last week how Eve was the first one that stood in the judgment of God. After her conversation with Satan, she begins to entertain the possibility that she can stand in judgment of God.

Eve is being invited, in effect, to make her own list of what's good and evil. This is not merely an invitation to break a rule, it's the beginning of all idolatry. It is to de-God God, it is to stand in God's place. It is to be where God is and decide what good and evil is for ourselves. The Bible then works hard all through its pages to tie all of human evil, first and foremost, to this beginning of rebellion, this is initial fundamental idolatry.

Then they get into the Promised Land. They go through these horrible cycles of sin and degradation amongst the covenant people until the people face judgment again. Then God, in his mercy, when they cry out for help, raises up a judge, and they are restored again to strength and security. It only takes a generation or two before they slide again. These horrible cycles with the repeated refrain, "In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes."

Judges 21:25 In those days *there was* no king in Israel: every man did *that which was* right in his own eyes.

That's called idolatry. Establishing what is right for yourself, marginalizing God, putting him off to the side, not recognizing any accountability at all, being your own god. You're at the center of the universe.

You just keep tracking this biblical story through and through and through until you finally come to Paul saying what Paul says in Romans, chapter 1:18: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them."

Romans 3:9 and following. Before one of the greatest passages on the cross in the New Testament. "What should we conclude then? Are we any better?" We Jews, are we better than Gentiles? "Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.

As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

What about all the good things that good people do in all kinds of normal walks of life: Of course there are good people around, and you are one of them. Yet the biblical analysis, you see, is not denying any of those sociological realities.

The Bible can often speak of good and bad in certain context in those relative categories. Yet at the deepest level of analysis, we don't know God, we run from him, we want to make our own universe. One of the most striking passages on sin is Psalm 51. It's written by David after he has committed the horrible sin.

One of the things he says in the opening verses addressing God in abject repentance is: "Against you only have I sinned and done this evil in your sight."

It's hard to think of anybody who he didn't sin against, and yet he has the guts to say, "Against you only have I sinned and done this evil in your sight."

At the deepest level, he has it exactly right. That is, what makes sin so vile is that it is first and foremost rebellion against God.

When we who are Christians try to talk about right and wrong in the world, and when we try to justify the importance of Christians and what they do in the world, so often we're describing things merely at a horizontal level.

The Bible says, 600 times, "God is wrathful." Six hundred times. Overwhelmingly, he's wrathful because of the idolatry.

Only when we begin to absorb these kinds of things from what the Bible says, it seems then, are we ready to face the implications of this first pillar. By and large, the biblical stance towards these things is that God doesn't owe us anything. We're a damned breed. He could, with perfect justice, consign all of us to destruction, and when he appears in his matchless glory we would have nothing to say.

We will then see so clearly how we have been self-focused, how we have made our own idols, how we've rejected the revelation that he has given. Revelation in nature; revelation in our conscience, stamped on us because we too have been made in the image of God; revelation from Holy Scripture where we've had access to it.

What's surprising is that God hasn't wiped us all out yet. What's surprising is how many freedoms we enjoy, how much food we enjoy, how much of life we enjoy, considering how much our hearts are not first and foremost God-centered.

There is a remarkable passage in Luke 13:1-5. "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices." So these are Galileans, probably Galilean Jews whom Pilate has killed for some reason not explained, and then actually took their human blood and mixed with the blood of the animals that they were sacrificing.

"Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?' " In other words, "Why do you think this happened? Because they were worse, more evil?" "No," he says. "I tell you, unless you repent you too will all perish."

Now in that case the suffering has come from an overt evil, Pilate's overt evil, but the same argument holds when there are so-called natural disasters. Verse 4: "Or those eighteen who

died when the Tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

So all the people who died in Katrina, do you think they were more evil than others? It’s so interesting to see what Jesus says. He does not say, “No, of course not. They’re fine people. It was just an accident. I mean, accidents happen. It’s sad. Maybe God was taking a walk at the time, but it happens, and they were fine people. There was no particular reason why they should die.”

That’s not what Jesus says. He says the really surprising thing is that you haven’t died, but you will. “You too will perish.” So whether Katrina takes you out now or you die in 5 years, 10 years, 20 years, or 50 years, the point is you’re still all under this curse. You’re still all under this sentence of death. That’s the assumption. Do you see? It’s a way of looking at reality that utterly blows out the first objections. So those are insights from the beginning of the Bible’s storyline. Now let me bring you some ...

End

Some Insights from the end of the Bible’s storyline.

We cannot stress strongly enough that the Bible lays out a heaven and earth to be gained and a hell to be shunned. If you try to assess what’s going in righteousness or suffering or illness only in this age, if that is the framework in which we try to think about these things and no other, we cannot begin to make progress in dealing with suffering.

The reason is because inevitably things will look a bit different 50 billion years from now. If you don’t believe that there’s no our conversation about this can go much farther.

There was a time when Christians were known, in the Puritan period, as people who knew how to die well.

We cannot preserve morality, spirituality, doctrinal purity or faithfulness in the home, or anything else unless we’re living in the light of eternity. We just cannot do it. So this stance from the end of life begins to reconfigure everything in this life, so that even if there are sorrows that we do not yet understand, one day we will stand in the presence of the King with our resurrection bodies, and we will look at everything from a slightly different angle. We will see everything through the triumphs of Christ, and even the cancer that took us out or the suffering Christians in some godforsaken part of the world where there is constant persecution, where there is judgment meted out in political and sociological and disease terms, all of those things will look very differently 50 billion years into eternity.

In other words, one of the things that Christians have to remember is that here there is no utopia. We may have our preferences in the upcoming elections. Some of us may be pretty strongly convinced one way or the other that if only this party gets in or that party gets in things will be a lot better in this country.

Something that C.S. Lewis wrote a long time ago. C.S. Lewis fought in the trenches of World War I, then, World War II broke out. By this time, he was lecturing at Oxford University. The

university chaplain in the university church didn't have a clue what to say to these young men. How do you get young men to be studying in wartime when everything seems so ... ultimate?

What's the point of studying microbiology and Roman history and English literature when people are mowing each other down? How do you make sense of that?

So the chaplain asked Lewis, who by this time was already beginning to establish, even as early as 1939, the beginning of a reputation for Christian apologetic. On that Sunday night, he climbed into the pulpit and gave an address that has been published many times called

"Learning in Wartime."

Lewis said, "A university is a society for the pursuit of learning. As students, you will be expected to make yourselves, or to start making yourselves, into what the Middle Ages called clerks, into philosophers, scientists, scholars, critics, historians, and at first sight this seems to be an odd thing to do during a great war.

What is the use of beginning a task which we have so little chance of finishing? Or even if we ourselves should happen not to be interrupted by death or military service, why should we, indeed how can we, continue to take an interest in these placid occupations when the lives of our friends and the liberties of a Europe are in the balance? Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?

Now it seems to me that we shall not be able to answer these questions until we have put them by the side of certain other questions, which every Christian ought to have asked himself in peacetime. I spoke just now of fiddling while Rome burns, but to a Christian the true tragedy of Nero must not be that he fiddled while the city was on fire but that he fiddled on the brink of hell.

You must forgive me for that crude monosyllable. I know that many wiser and better Christians than I in these days do not like to mention heaven and hell even in a pulpit. I know, too, that nearly all the references to this subject in the New Testament come from a single source, but then that source is our Lord himself. People will tell you it is St. Paul, but that is untrue. These are an overwhelmingly dominical doctrine." That is, coming from the Lord Jesus.

"They are not really removable from the teaching of Christ or of his church. If we do not believe them, our presence in this church is great tomfoolery. If we do, we must sometimes overcome our spiritual prudery and mention them. The moment we do so, we can see that every Christian who comes to a university must at all times face a question compared with which the questions raised by the war are relatively unimportant.

He must ask himself how it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or to hell to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology.

If human culture can stand up to that, it can stand up to anything. To admit that we can retain our interest in learning under the shadow of these eternal issues but not under the shadow of a

European war would be to admit that our eyes are closed to the voice of reason and very wide open to the voice of our nerves and our mass emotions.”

In other words, so often when these questions are laid out in front of us our horizons are just too small. They’re just too little. We worry about the wretched devastation from a tsunami, and so we ought to worry. We worry about the wretched devastation caused by the equivalent of three tsunamis every year in Africa called AIDS, and so we ought to worry.

But it’s all nothing compared with the devastation coming from hell itself, for there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned, and we cannot even begin to think about these questions properly until we get those first two pillars rightly in place.

- 1. We are all Guilty**
- 2. There is a Heaven to gain and a Hell to shun.**