

Sermon for Sunday, January 17, 2010

TWO HUMANITIES

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Romans, 5:12-21

Romans 5 addresses some of the truly great questions: Why is there so much evil and sin in the world of men? Is it because of ignorance? Fear? Bad genetics? Poor nurture? How should we understand death? Is it a natural process – part of the cycle of life? Is it the aged person's friend and a blessed release? Or is it a tragedy?

How shall we construe evil? Are chance and matter supreme? Bertrand Russell said "Man [is] condemned today to lose his dearest [friends]. Tomorrow he himself [must] pass through the gate of darkness. It remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day."¹ Or is Christ supreme, even in the chaos of this world? Is there hope in suffering? Is there something after death? The debates get very theoretical.

But Romans 5 also intersects with the headlines from Haiti and its terrible earthquake. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere; it seems that virtually no buildings were constructed to withstand an earthquake. So the president's palace, the parliament building, hospitals, schools, prisons and thousands of homes collapsed. The homes belonged to diplomats and shopkeepers, church leaders and laborers alike. Early estimates of the death toll defy comprehension: One hundred thousand or more in a small country.

What went wrong? When we hear of a disaster, we should probably remain silent first. But people ask why. Scientists tell us that the quake in Haiti and the San Francisco quake of 1989 were both 7.0 on Richter scale. Sixty-three people died in California, one hundred thousand plus in Haiti. Why? The government of Haiti is so feeble that it has no building codes – not even for its own buildings. How does that happen?

A series of corrupt governments plundered Haiti for seventy years. As you know, the American military occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934. Some critics say that allowed the line of military dictators to get started. Others blame colonial taskmasters, but the Dominican Republic was a colony, too, and it's far stronger.

Notice the strong presence of the voodoo religion. It promotes the mindset that life is capricious and planning futile. Relief agencies fill the island. The United Nations has governed Haiti for years. Are we training Haitians to be immature and dependent?

Most important for us: What does the Bible **say** about such tragedies? Where is the Lord in this? Sceptics say it proves He is missing. One preacher said God is punishing Haitians because they made a pact with the devil to gain independence. Is God punishing Haiti? Or is He standing by helplessly? Is earthquake or plague a proof of God's silence or is it an act of His judgment? Is human sin a factor? The Bible says "Yes," but not necessarily the way we think.

In fact, a building near Jerusalem collapsed during Jesus' day, so that he answered our question. In Luke 13, some people told Jesus that Pontius Pilate killed several Jews while in the temple offering sacrifices. Was this an act of God's judgment? Jesus replied, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? No! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

¹ Russell, *Free Man's Worship*

Jesus linked these deaths to the recent collapse of a building that killed eighteen people: "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" (13:2-5).

People were thinking the slain Galileans especially deserved God's judgment; that is why Pilate killed them in the temple. Jesus says, by that logic, the people killed when a tower collapsed must have been the worst in the land, whom God lined up so He could execute them all at once.

Jesus says, "No, but unless you repent you will perish." That is, we are all susceptible to sudden death. People who suffer disaster are no more evil than anyone else. All humans are guilty and ought to repent lest we perish.

In terms of the earthquake, we may ask, "Why did so many die in Haiti? Why did so few die in San Francisco?" The people of California are better governed, but, the Bible says, they are not better humans.

This is a new approach to tragedy. People ask, "Why did these people die?" But we could also ask, "Why didn't I die?" Jesus told the people, "Unless you repent you will perish." He doesn't say, "These people were innocent." He says, "They are no more guilty than you and I."

Therefore, we should not ask why disasters strike this nation or that individual. No one knows. But disasters show that this world is broken and that human's sin is a major part of its ruin. Therefore, we should repent of sin and turn to God for healing and grace.

1. Sin and death reigned through Adam

Romans 5 says sin entered the world through the first man, Adam, who broke a direct command from God: "Touch not the fruit of that tree." He did this not simply because he wanted the fruit, but because he chose to rebel against God. Adam refused to trust the life-giving God "and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (5:12). Death is the result of sin.

If no human sinned, no human would die. That's a strong claim! Darwinists and naturalists scoff. They think humans are superior animals who die like animals.

The Bible regards death as something unnatural, an alien intrusion, not God's original intent, but the penalty for sin. "Adam became mortal when he disobeyed." When God says, "Dust you are and to dust you shall return," He does not merely describe, He judges. Death is a demotion. We're God's special creation, but because of sin, we have become "like the beasts that perish" (Psalm 49:12).

The Bible sees death as outrage and tragedy. We can't know God's original plan for life. Perhaps it included a long season on earth. Then perhaps God might have lifted us to himself, as he did with Enoch and Elijah. Death is an aberration.

We deny that the Haitians died because they committed a certain sin or because they are more evil. No earthquake would kill anyone if Adam, Eve and their children faithfully loved and served God.

Still, sin is a factor. It has different forms and Paul uses different words for it in Romans 5. First, it is a disposition of rebellion against God. When we sin, we turn away from God and to exalting ourselves. If we know and violate a law, it is transgression. This is the point of Romans 5:13-14. Sin is in the world even if people don't know God's law, because they still deify themselves and forget God.

The Bible doesn't tell us how evil entered the universe, but it does tell us how sin entered our world. It began with Satan and his temptation. But Adam entertained Satan's word and doubted God. Sin therefore entered through Adam who represented the human race. When Adam, the head and representative of our race fell, we fell with him. Much as the president or congressmen or governors represent us, so Adam represented us.

Sadly, we also freely choose to join in Adam's sin. We imitate the sins of Adam and the sins of the people around us. So sin enters the world three ways: through Satan, through Adam, and through our choice to follow the same path.

But sin and death don't just enter our world. In 5:4,17, Paul says, "death reigned". Romans 5:20 says, "Sin increased" and 5:21 says, "Sin reigned in death." Sin reigns because Satan and people and our appetites tempt us. We sin because we yield to temptation. We sin because we see bad examples and are drawn to them.

Take performance-enhancing drugs like steroids. People take them because they work in the short run. They create muscle mass. They're illegal because they have serious side effects. And they are unfair because they give cheaters an advantage over honest people. But some people see the advantage and can't resist. The same applies to kickbacks or theft of intellectual property.

Now and again, the Bible compares sin to a sickness or contagion (1 Corinthians 5, 1 Timothy 6:4, Luke 11:34). We do seem to catch some sins. People who are abused as children are more likely to be abusive. No one thinks, "This is what I want to do when I grow up." I think the same holds for "smaller" sins, such as stinginess or judging or thinking "I'm unique." It's easy to follow the patterns we experience.

This leads back to the earthquake. First, if mankind had not sinned, earthquakes either would not happen or they would hurt no one. This world does not have the form God originally intended.

Second, the people of Haiti and the nations that have wronged Haiti are both culpable. Voodoo does not promote responsibility. Colonial masters can also start destructive patterns – including a sense of helplessness and dependency. And corrupt leaders keep imitating one another. I'm not trying to weigh one sin against another. I do not say the Haitians especially deserve judgment. I am saying that sin multiplies problems. And the role of leaders is vital.

Where is God?

Many people ask, "Where is God in this?" Some say God is punishing Haiti. Others say the opposite: It proves there is no god. Or, if He does exist, He doesn't care. The same question came up 250 years ago. In 1755 an 8.8 earthquake (over 100 times stronger) struck near Lisbon, the capital of Portugal, on a Sunday morning. Thousands perished while gathered for worship. In Lisbon alone about 50,000 died. Buildings collapsed and a tsunami arrived thirty minutes later. Many more died on the coasts of Iberia and North Africa.

Some said God was punishing a corrupt, hypocritical church. Many deists, not orthodox Christians, said that God was doing His best. He had created "the best of all possible worlds." Every ounce of pain is, somehow, necessary for greater happiness to flourish elsewhere.

The great Enlightenment skeptic Voltaire erupted and attacked this answer with his work "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster". He asked:

“What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived
That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother's breast?
Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice than London, Paris or sunlit Madrid?
In these men dance; at Lisbon yawns the abyss.”

Voltaire protests the idea God that oversees a predestined chain of cause and effect. He cannot believe that disaster is necessary, that God placed "volcanoes seething beneath our feet" because some people must fall to "predestined tombs."

Nay, press not on my agitated heart
These iron and irrevocable laws,
This rigid chain of bodies, minds, and worlds.
Dreams of the bloodless thinker are such thoughts.

Voltaire was no Christian, but his objection has merit. We cannot invoke the balance of the great chain of being, for God holds the chain and is not enchained by it. We can't view disaster as part of God's perfect plan – one in which every evil, even the death of infants, is somehow necessary for the greater good.

Though he didn't say so, Voltaire believed earthquakes and other natural disasters prove either that there is no God or that He is far off and uncaring. In fact, we need an answer for the problem of natural disasters. Humans are responsible for the pain inflicted by tyrants, bullies, warriors and fools. But humans do not cause hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes or plagues.

There are two options: In the first option, the naturalist says earthquakes prove that the world is a dangerous place that is not designed for us. Physical forces are indifferent to us; no one is in charge. And life has no meaning, no purpose, no value. The label is nihilism, from the Latin nihil, meaning nothing. They're growing in number. They say the universe is unaware of us – and happens to be full of hostile forces. But human evil makes it worse and there is no one to stop it or rein it in.

From theory to entertainment. Notice the shift in the way heroes and superheroes are presented in recent years. Heroes are no better, morally, than anyone else. Soldiers and spies have great skill, but increasingly they are motivated by revenge, not justice or love of country. Superheroes are no longer like Superman. They're like the Greco-Roman gods - more powerful than men, but no better. Think of Batman, the X-men, the Watchmen. They are angry, vengeful, even evil. Who will watch over such watchmen?

Cormac McCarthy is a technically skilled writer whose novels show a universe that is indifferent or hostile to mankind. They go like this: A very bad person does terrible things to people who aren't quite as bad as he is. He gets away with it, it seems. Then a truck hits him. There are the forces in his novels: human evil and blind chance. No one can stop our self-destruction. There is no hope. We are members of an endangered species hoping to stave off extinction. And we're not going to make it.

The second option: The Christian agrees that we should take human evil seriously. We disagree with them because we have hope. We agree with Voltaire and the naturalists that this world cannot present God's perfect plan. But we disagree about natural evil. They say it's normal. Christians say it's typical and common in our world. But this world is not normal. It's not the way they are supposed to be.

God can make use of evil. God can use the tragic deaths in Haiti in many ways. The government there might start to govern better. We may learn compassion and generosity. The Haitians may help and comfort each other as never before. People might consider the brevity of life.

But we deny that evil is ultimate or essential to the universe. "We exist in the long melancholy aftermath of a primordial catastrophe... This is a broken and wounded world and... the universe languishes in bondage to "powers" spiritual and terrestrial [that are] alien to God" ² Still, there is reason to hope.

Reason for hope

² Hart, *Tremors of Doubt* - WSJ, 12/31, 2004.

We know Paul's description of the problem of sin and the fall. The gospel begins when God plans to heal this broken world. That is why Jesus, Son of God, took flesh at the Incarnation. Jesus entered this world, to a people and a planet that are his own and yet hostile to him: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize [know] him." (John 1). His incarnation is his assault against sin and our rescue from destruction.

God is the transcendent creator. He lives beyond our world in perfect peace and joy. Yet Jesus came into the world he oversees and feels compassion for it. He entered in full; he became, Isaiah says, "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:2). His best friends deserted him in his hour of greatest need. His good friend Lazarus died and he wept. When the city of Jerusalem refused his gentle salvation, he wept again because he saw that the passions that led them to reject Jesus would also lead them to rebel against Rome and be crushed by Rome. Jesus feels for this world and weeps over it.

Some say God is full of joy and peace so that he cannot grieve at the same time. He cannot be joyful in heaven and weep with us or the people of Haiti. But the Bible says, "Jesus wept." Besides, it's perfectly possible to be joyful and to grieve at the same time – every time a beloved child goes to college.

There is a good book about suffering titled *When God Weeps*, Written by Joni Eareckson Tada and Pastor Steven Estes. Joni Tada has been a quadriplegic since a diving accident many years ago. She is bound to a wheelchair. She tells of a trip to Africa, when she came bringing Bibles and wheelchairs to people like her, people stricken by polio, people whose legs were worthless. Some had strong arms, some didn't. Some could hardly move at all; some were so poor they lived in boxes or on raw concrete. We feel their misery and their joy.

Joy? Yes, tears of joy as they meet Joni. They smiled as they sang, clapped, and worshiped. Joni realized: "Even the people who know there aren't enough wheelchairs to go around; they are so happy for those who get something."

Even humans can feel joy and sorrow at the same time. Every parent who sent a child off to college knows this. So, too, for God. In His transcendence, He is at peace, for He know our future and the healing of all things. Yet, in His immanence, on the street, he feels our sorrow.

Romans 5 explains it this way: Sin and death reigned through Adam, but grace, righteousness and life reign through Christ. (5:17) "Those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ."

Practically, I think of small groups. Practically, I'm thinking of real relationships, where you talk openly and pray for each other. Where you think together and notice the difference between old heroes in old westerns and new heroes who have powers. You can share problems and solutions, be open, real and be part of the new life.

Review with me. Paul says everyone is included in the problem of sin and guilt. Both Jew and Gentile have rebelled against God and live in the grip of sin – "under sin" he says. But everyone can be connected to the grace of God through Christ. Abraham is the father of us all, through faith. Through faith we stand innocent before God, the judge. We are reconciled to God our friend. We have peace with God and we have confidence of God's determination that we should taste the glory of God with mature character.

Adam and Christ stand in contrast

Paul compares and contrasts Adam and Christ. Both are representatives of the human race. As they act, they take humanity with them. But in opposite ways:

5:12 "Through Adam, sin and death entered the world and came to all."

5:18 "Through Jesus, righteousness and justification brings life for all men."

5:17 "By the trespass of one man, death reigned."

5:21 "Through Christ, grace reigns to bring eternal life."

5:15 "Many died by the trespass of one man."

5:17 And "Those who receive God's... grace and righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."

I need to ask you to come back next week to consider our new life in Christ more thoroughly than we have considered the problem of the old life of Adam and sin.

Grace and life reign through Christ

Jesus has done this great, difficult thing – he died for sin and justified sinners so he can do the next things: reconcile us to God, give us eternal life, and unite us to Him. Adam was our old representative and with him we knew sin and death. When we put our faith in Jesus, we made him our new representative. Now we have his righteousness, his life, his peace. We can experience it by sharing a life together.