

Life is Fragile, Evil is Real, God is Sure

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Romans 12:9-21

Sermon Series:
Seven Greatest
Virtues and Vices:
Greed and Charity

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For most of us, the date of September 11, 2001 is forever etched in our memories. Many of us remember where we were and what we were doing when we learned the fateful news that United Flight 93 was hijacked and crashed in Shanksville, PA, that another plane slammed into the Pentagon and two other planes, in quick succession, incinerated the World Trade Center Towers. We huddled around our TV sets that day to witness the incomprehensible images of a memory that will be forever known by its numerical expression—9/11.

On 9/11, we gathered in this sanctuary for an impromptu prayer service. Our sanctuary was half full despite that the only means used to promote the service was word of mouth. I recall so many raw emotions poured out in prayer that night: anger, frustration, confusion, you name it.

The following evening, September 12th, we gathered for a second prayer service. I preached on the subject, “Life is Fragile, Evil is Real, God is Sure.” I believe these things to be true, now as then. I’d like to revisit these three themes and reflect once more on the fragility of life, the reality of

evil and our sure confidence in God.

We add to this 9/11 event another tragedy that has punched a hole in the psyche of many people here today; that of Jack Donaldson’s death, the 12-year-old boy from our church who drowned in a stream swollen by heavy rains near his house last Thursday. One day, the Donaldsons are confidently going about their business. The next day, they are planning their son’s funeral. *Life is Fragile.*

In the early morning of September 11, 246 unsuspecting people boarded four airplanes bound for U.S. destinations. That same day, 125 people began their Monday morning duties at the Pentagon while another 2600 people did the same at the New York Twin Towers. *Life is Fragile.*

Events like 9/11 and this accidental drowning jolt us into contemplating the tenuous nature of life. Some of us this past week have had a crash course on life’s fragility. Crisis has a way of stripping the veneer off our smiley-faced world. One day we are rolling merrily along. The next instant, we are plunged into unimaginable horror.

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When things are going well, we appear confident and self-assured. When crisis strikes, we come to find out that everyone breaks so easily.

These past few weeks, we have witnessed a strange weather pattern. We have endured a once-in-a-century earthquake, two hurricanes in close succession and a flood of unprecedented proportions. That leaves only fire and locusts to achieve plagues of Biblical proportions.

But if we're going to ask why in the bad times, we need to ask it of the good times, also. Why is this morning so perfectly delightful?

I'll return to this why question later in this sermon, but first I'd like to think with you about this second theme, namely *Evil is Real*. Hijacking planes to crash into buildings is a diabolical scheme. It's an act of unspeakable evil. *Evil is real*, my friends! There are sinister forces at work in this world to bring us down.

Romans chapter 12 has a lot to say about evil. Paul implores us in verse 9, "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good." The word "hate" that is associated with evil is an emotionally charged word. We're not neutral about evil. We hate it with a passion.

In this excessively tolerant age, we're loath to call anything evil. But make no mistake about it, what happened ten years ago is pure,

unmitigated evil. It's diabolical in the extreme.

Paul makes a distinction in this passage between hating evil and hating people who perpetrate evil. We hate evil; we do not hate evil people. We despise wrongdoing, but respect the wrongdoer. In common parlance, we say that we hate the sin, but love the sinner.

Paul summons us in verse 14: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." To bless our enemies is to ask God's favor on them. Paul challenges us in verse 17: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." I'm reminded of Jesus' words in his Sermon on the Mount: "But I say to you, love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us" (Matthew 5:44). There is no place where I need God's grace more than in the arena of loving my enemies. I'm fine about loving my friends; it's my enemies I can't stand. I'm so tempted to repay evil for evil. The problem with revenge is there is simply no end to it. Only love breaks the endless, wretched cycle of revenge.

Paul continues, in verse 19, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, it will repay, says the Lord.' The provocative image of heaping burning coals on enemies heads that follows in verse 20 is lifted straight out of the book of Proverbs (25:21-22). "No, if

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your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by so doing they will heap burning coals on their heads.” Showing kindness to evildoers has a way of heaping shame on their heads.

Paul summarizes the passage with these overarching words: “Do not be overcome by evil; overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). As I said, there is no place where I need God’s grace more than loving my enemies.

This brings us to the third theme, *God is Sure*. I’ve logged hundreds of hours as a pastor trying to make sense of this why question. I’ve been asking this question myself in the aftermath of Jack’s drowning. How could a good and powerful God allow stuff like this to happen? In my struggle to make sense of tragedy, I find myself in Job’s shoes: “Surely I spoke of things I do not understand; things too wonderful for me to know” (Job 42:3).

The question why is as old as Job, yet it seems to be cropping up with great frequency lately. If it’s any consolation to you, Jesus asked this question, also. As Jesus bore the full weight of humanity’s sin on the cross, he cried out in agony, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jack’s death hit me hard this week. When I heard the news, I knew instinctively I was going to wrestle with this tragedy whether or not I brought God

into it. Since abandoning belief in God at a time like this doesn’t help matters, I’ve decided to bring God into it and wrestle with God on this one.

The Psalms are intended to teach us how to pray. The Psalms teach us to bring everything to God in prayer. We can bring our grief and anger, doubt and disappointment, bitterness and betrayal to God in prayer. God can take it.

Yesterday, I officiated at a wedding in which 1st Corinthians 13 was read in the service. First Corinthians 13 is the odds-on favorite to be read at weddings. You may know the words: “Love is patient, love is kind; it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud,” and so forth. Most people ignore the end of the passage where Paul writes, “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Right now, I see in a mirror dimly. As a religious professional of 38 years, there are times when life makes no sense to me. But one day I will see everything face-to-face. Paul writes in this chapter, “Now I know in part, then I shall know fully even as I am fully known” (13:12).

One of the great themes of Scripture is that God identifies with the suffering. John Stott, a great Anglican preacher who died last month, said it well: “I would never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In this real world of pain, how

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could we worship a God who was immune to it?"

In 1989, 96 soccer fans, mostly young people, were crushed to death in a stadium accident in Sheffield, England. At one of the hospitals where the victims were taken, an attending surgeon spoke to parents who had come to learn the fate of their children. This surgeon had the grim task of reading the names from the list of those who had died in the accident. After he read the deceased's names, the doctor expressed his sympathy to the parents. He said that he believed God understood the parents' grief and that God was with them in their time of need. One father bitterly responded, "What does God know about losing a son?"

It turns out that God knows quite a bit, actually. Christianity is a religion that tells you God lost his Son in an act of violent injustice. Our Christian faith doesn't answer to our satisfaction the question why. But it does offer the promise of one who is present with us in our suffering.

We don't know the reason why God allows suffering, but we know the reason it can't be. It can't be that God doesn't love us. It can't be that God doesn't care. God so loved the world that he was willing to come down and enter it. God

doesn't stand aloof. Jesus Christ is our Immanuel, "God with us." In Jesus Christ, God suffered as you and I have suffered. God takes into himself the cause of suffering—sin and evil and achieves by Christ's death the cure for it all—forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

Christians are not promised trouble-free lives. As believers, we don't live charmed lives. Sometimes, as we're told in Scripture, the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer.

God doesn't protect us from trouble; God protects us in trouble. The most persistent promise Jesus makes to his disciples is the very last line from Matthew's gospel: "I am with you always, even to the close of the age" (28:20).

The ending of Romans 8 is the best! Paul enumerates earlier in the chapter the hardships facing Christians in Rome—persecution, famine, poverty, danger and death. Yet, he has the audacity to conclude, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).