

God's Ways

Isaiah 55:1-9

Luke 13:1-9

Pick your least favorite image from the Russian aggression against Ukraine. I will not give a graphic description of any of those images. I ask, rather, that you see in your mind's eye one that has disgusted, nauseated, or even enraged you. Hold onto that thought. Now. How does a loving God permit *that*!?!?

Last week Arnold Swarzenegger released a video in which he made a direct appeal to the Russian people. Speaking in English with Russian subtitles, he told the story of his lifelong friendship with a Soviet-era world champion weight lifter, and how, through that relationship, and his body-building and film careers, he has enjoyed decades of warm interactions with hundreds of Russians. He spoke of how his father, fighting for the Nazis, broke his back in the World War II battle of Leningrad. With news footage video backdrops he told the truth about what Putin and his generals are doing to Ukraine. He made appeals to the Thug of the Kremlin to stop the war, and to the Russian soldiers to get the news about what they are doing and witnessing to their friends and relatives back home.

Swarzenegger concluded with appreciation for the bravery of the many Russians protesting this war. He called them his new heroes. He said, "You have the

true heart of Russia.” At the very ending he said, “My dear Russian friends, may God bless you all.” Reaching out for comment, Fox News reporter Jennifer Griffin asked, “Do you believe in God when you watch the videos behind your message?” Swarzenegger replied, “I have never been a church-goer. Vladimir Putin seems to feel he *is* God. But God is far more mysterious, far more difficult to predict, and has reasons for things I do not pretend to understand. But I think I do believe in God.”

Our passage from Luke has a backstory. Pontius Pilate had recently ordered the execution of a band of Galilean rebels. His soldiers accomplished his directive by entering the Jerusalem temple—something Romans seldom did—while those Galileans were watching the priest sacrifice animals they had brought in for that purpose. The Romans killed the men and forced the priests to burn their bodies along with those of the animals. To the obvious disgust we feel about such a thing, add the layer of outrage the Jews would have felt at this desecration of their holy place. Those who brought Jesus this news asked, in essence, “Do you think these men were worse sinners than the rest of us? Did they somehow **deserve** it?” Jesus answers, “No. But unless you repent you will also perish.”

Jesus cites a parallel incident. A tower in Jerusalem had fallen, killing eighteen. Were they worse sinners? “No. But unless you repent you will likewise perish.” He does not here explain exactly what he means. But we know from the body of his teaching that (a) all of us sin; (b) all of us must therefore repent from our sins; and (c) he came to offer us life through his atoning sacrifice on the cross. We need not perish,

sinner though we all be. Yet some will choose to perish by not repenting. To dig in on this point he tells a mini-parable. A farmer, irritated that a fig tree had failed to produce a single fruit in three years, instructs his vine dresser to pull it out of the ground. The man plays for time, promising to give the tree special care. The farmer agrees, but adds, "if it bears good fruit next year, well and good; but if not cut it down." If it bears good fruit.

We bear good fruit when we obey God's will, when we do not sin. When we sin without repentance we perish, we die to God's presence and peace. Death still comes for us all, physical death. Whether we die in some random tragedy, like those trapped in the tower rubble, or the Galilean rebels, or the people of Ukraine; or we die beautifully and peacefully, surrounded by our loved ones, we die. That is not the question. The question is, have we borne good fruit? Have we lived obediently, generously, lovingly? Have shown our repentance in action?

Jesus teaches that our eternal destiny hinges on this question. He has no use for those who create a legalistic, judgmental parody of his meaning. We do not earn our way into God's presence. We receive God's presence as a gracious gift made possible by Jesus' death. But what do we do with the grace? What do we do with the gift? Those of us most involved in the Afghan resettlement effort have admitted to each other that it frustrates us that we have been told not to publicize it. Our partner organization, Church World Service, has learned not to draw the attention of the dodgier elements of our community to the presence here of single males from the

Middle East. We wish we could make a bigger deal of it. Frankly, we are proud of what we are doing and would like people to know we are doing it. Pride is a sin. But we are still bearing good fruit. It is all very complicated.

The Isaiah 55 uses the image of food and drink to repeat the teaching about God's free gift of, well, everything. Its lyrical opening asks why we would pay good money for wine and milk and bread that do not truly satisfy, when God freely provides us with spiritual food "that your soul might live". A school of Isaiah's disciples, or perhaps just one of them, wrote these words some years after the prophet's death. They did so at the time of the restoration of the children of Israel from exile in Babylon. It was a time of joy but also a time of fear. They faced the daunting challenge of rebuilding their homes, the walls of Jerusalem, and even the temple. They had to grow their food supplies. They had to reestablish their religious rituals and places. They had to rebuild their lives.

To exhausted, joyful yet fearful people the prophet scholars call Second Isaiah promised that the Lord would make a new covenant with them. Isaiah 55:5: "Behold, you shall call nations that you know not, and nations that knew you not shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you." Translation: You, tiny little Israel, shall become renowned among even the mightiest of nations. God has lifted you up. Though you presently fear for your physical security, take solace. For God has promised to provide for your every need, both physical and spiritual.

Scholar John McKenzie writes, "(T)o accept the food of Yahweh as sufficient, and not to seek laboriously elsewhere for food which does not satisfy, is to commit oneself to faith in the saving power of Yahweh." This is Second Isaiah's message, that while the people go about the necessary business of rebuilding their lives, the Lord will provide for your spiritual well-being. The Lord promises a new covenant. We Christians believe Jesus of Nazareth was and is the perfect fulfillment of that covenant. The names Old and New Testaments can also be translated as the Old and New Covenants. It is important to understand that each represents a chapter in one book. God has always been working toward the fulfillment of this final covenant—even through the giving of the other covenants, with Abraham, Moses and David.

Seeing that God has planned to offer eternal security from of old can give us greater confidence in the goodness of God's purposes especially when senseless, random events cause affliction. Why does God permit evil? Why does God permit suffering? I do not know. As Second Isaiah reminds us, "(M)y thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord." John McKenzie again: "Yahweh cannot communicate his whole purpose to us, for we are too small to understand it. We must surrender to the truth that there are dimensions to the ways of Yahweh that lie beyond revelation." None of us like to depend on unseen realities. But as the Book of Hebrews tells us, "(F)aith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." God has issued all of humanity the opportunity to receive eternal security. We receive it through faith in the same Jesus of Nazareth who placed salvation in the context of suffering.

Humanity has always suffered. We say this not to diminish the horror but to state a fact. The last time there was not at least one hot war raging somewhere on Planet Earth may have been when our species were still hunter-gatherers. North America has not endured war on our continent since 1865. But this does not disprove the prevalence of war, it merely proves we have been lucky. Unless you have gone to war somewhere else in the service of your country, you have not experienced the truth of war. But we have experienced 9/11. We have experienced the deaths of loved ones. A teen aged girl was shot to death in a convenience store parking lot on Poplar St. last year. Why does God permit such pain?

I do not know. But I do know that both Testaments testify to God's unchanging offer of relief and safety. Both urge all people to forsake wickedness and seek obedience to the will of God. Jesus tells his followers to repent, to turn away from our sins. But this does not accomplish our spiritual security. God does that. Especially as we watch gruesome war videos, we must accept the gift of that faith in Jesus that brings us true peace. Especially as we ponder whatever we most dread we must accept the gift of that faith in Jesus that brings us true peace. When we use words like suffering and affliction we refer to the worst, the most intense experiences that can challenge our trust in a loving God. It is natural and normal for us to feel doubt, dread, even anger at God when troubles come for us. Turn toward him in those moments, and remember that he has experienced great pain too.

Obey. Repent. Believe.