**When Bad Things Happen to Good People**

**Connecting the Dots of Faith and Suffering**

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**Scripture: I Corinthians 1:16-2:10 (selected verses)**

Do you think it odd that we never question God’s will when life is good? When life is good in our little circle of significant people—when our old folks are not sick, when our young folks all have jobs, when marriages are hanging together, and healthy babies are being born, we don’t struggle with the will of God. When our lives are in reasonable order, we very seldom ask why bad things happen to good people. **It is when life is “off the rails” that we question God’s will.**

It is when the tapestry we wove so carefully in our personal lives, or the church where our faith was institutionally supported, or the fabric of our society that is coming apart at the seams that we throw back our heads and shout into the dark night sky, “Why?” This sermon is lifted from a book I am struggling to finish. It reflects the times of tragedy that have occurred during the seventy years since I first became a pastor in 1954. I remember the anguish of sitting with those families when their comfort zone had just been destroyed.

 I really am writing it for myself as well as for you as we Christians struggle even though we believe in **both** God’s providence and his being our heavenly Father who loves us more than we can imagine. Sometimes we find it difficult to balance God’s eternal control with our earthly freedom. We all need to “connect the dots” between our religious faith and our sufferings.

These are sometimes painful memories when I either lay in my own bed, sat in a home, walked a beach until sunup, or stood by a hospital bed with grieving families. For these good people, my job was to help them soldier on without losing their own faith:

* My first experience of loss beyond my understanding was the word “cancer” in 1947. Why did my daddy die when he was forty-nine and I was twelve and we did not own a home?
* When I was a nineteen-year-old pastor in 1954, why was a little boy killed when his bicycle suddenly swerved into the path of a car while his mother was watching from her mill village front porch?
* The first year after I finished seminary in 1958, why was a young mother’s little baby born with one arm? Was the preacher right who told her God was punishing the baby for his mother’s sin?
* Why was Stan killed in 1967 at sixteen? He was the only biological child of his parents, and the only one of six killed when the driver went to sleep returning from a baseball tournament
* Why did a family doctor and his father drowned at Cherry Grove beach in 1975, leaving a widowed mother and widowed wife and four children in Asheboro?
* Why was a teenager accidently shot on New Year’s Day 1977, and why did his mother die young from ovarian cancer, and why was his brother killed on a four-wheeler, leaving a very good and wealthy man to live a very lonely life?
* Why was a young family of four all killed on their way to a college homecoming in 1982 when a drunk driver hit them head-on with a jug of moonshine between his legs?
* Why did a young woman die in 1982 from eating shrimp because she unknowingly was allergic to iodine?
* Why was a Seneca Indian, who had attended my church once, killed as a lineman in a snowstorm? (Power line workers from four states shut down work and jammed a sanctuary with over 800 people at the funeral—workers who were fed 1500 sandwiches prepared by the church for their lunch)
* Why did Tod die in his sleep in 2022 at age 58, leaving a widow, a teen age daughter, a sister and brother and two octogenarian parents to grieve?
* Why did Rusty fall dead as he opened the kitchen door of his own home in 2023 when I was guest preacher—one month before he was to give one of his daughters in marriage?

Beyond personally meeting with these families, I had the impossible task of helping the family and the congregation to make some sense of why bad things happen to good people. Funeral eulogies following tragedies are a minister’s most heart wrenching efforts to help connect our faith and our grief. My children, grandchildren, my wife’s family and friends and I had to do with this issue when Joan went from great health following a disciplined life of nutrition, weight, and spirituality to “deterioration of the central nervous system” (i.e. brain atrophy) at age eighty-four. She went to heaven in 2021 at age eighty-six. We had to affirm anew that though life is not fair, God is good.

On this subject we all are “theologians” because, as John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost,*” we try to “justify the ways of God to humankind.” We have these conversations in every relationship of our life—families, friends, fellow students, counseling sessions, and in the private struggles of our own mind. Yet, the mystery remains unsolved, the conundrum remains: “**Is God all powerful, but not all good so he is unwilling to prevent suffering;** **or is God all good, but not all powerful so that he is unable to prevent suffering?**” Either option leaves the non-believer using suffering and pain to justify atheism. They want a god who is simply a fixer. The God we worship inspires us to be good and to love, **but nowhere are evil and hatred or pain and loss explained.**

I came across recently words I scribbled down that had been written by the famous professor who was scheduled to teach our class in the summer of 1975 in Edinburgh regarding pain and suffering:

“None of us can claim to have been granted more than certain **slender divinings of truth which are otherwise surrounded by clouds and thick darkness.”**

By the time our class met, Dr. John Baille had died, and a graduate student of his had to read to us the unpublished book copy! While the publisher was editing the manuscript follow Dr. Baille’s death his wife had chosen the title, *The Sense of the Presence of God for* the book. Let me read his phraseology again regarding pain and suffering: **“none of us can claim to have been granted more than a few slender divinings that are surrounded by clouds and thick darkness.”** She did not use the word “nonsense” or “mystery” but “the sense of the presence of God.”

God inspired the book of Job to be written for our Bible, but when Job asked God to tell him the reasons for his sufferings, God’s reply was not what Job wanted and not what we want today. Job and we want an answer that we understand. In other words, Job was like us; he could not reason it out in his mind. It was rather a long description of **God’s ways not being Job’s way and God’s thoughts not being Job’s thoughts.** Finally, in the last chapter of a long book, Job confessed, “I knew you only by hearsay, but now having seen you with my own eyes, I retract t all my questions and I repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:2-6)

So it is that the book of the Bible devoted to explaining the meaning of suffering did not explain the meaning of suffering!!! Father John Powell, a Catholic professor, has observed, “God seems to be saying to Job and to all of us who demand answers to life’s mysteries, **‘This is not yet the time for answer; this is rather the time for trust.”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

We all must confess that like Job and St. Paul, the thing that really messes up our mind is how do we reconcile God’s being both the Providence of God as Almighty and God as our loving heavenly Father. We are still stuck with the mystery of why bad things happen to good people.

One of my “teachers” through his writings was Nels F. Ferré, a Swedish scholar who taught at Andover-Newton Theological Seminary and Vanderbilt University. Dr. Ferré suffered from a disease that allowed him no more than three hours of sleep each night for many years; then he wrote, “I also watched helplessly as my baby daughter suffered and died.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In his book from which I began to learn in 1955, he wrote, “**Religion is real only insofar as it helps life to learn real truth,; any substitute for truth becomes a sham. Religion is not just for fair weather. Unless our religious faith finds meaning through and beyond suffering, it fails us when we most need it.”[[3]](#footnote-3) But Dr. Ferr**é continued later that the “faith meaning” is not a theological explanation, but trust in midst of mystery.

A few years back, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People.* He began, “**All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting.”** Kushner called it the only theological question that really matters, and his fan mail seemed to bear out that assertion! Rabbi Kushner made a **fabulous fortune from book royalties by** asking the question that always lurks in the shadows of everyone’s mind! Sadly, his intriguing book did not answer the age-old question; nor does my own seventy years of “clergy-laity” conversations give satisfactory answers when people near and dear to me ask it. Rabbi Kushner was the father of a physically challenged child who lived fourteen years. He rejected the theology that tells us we suffer because it “tests our faith.” He found no comfort from those who insisted that his child was handicapped because God knew the Rabbi and his wife would be good parents. He concluded that we do not pray to change the inevitable like limited intelligence, physical handicap, terminal cancer, or other requests for “divine healing.” Rather, our prayers change us! We are relieved of bitterness, comforted in loneliness, strengthened in patience, or enhanced in our talents as care givers. Through what God is doing for us, the person whom we loved but are losing becomes more calm, more secure, and obviously more loved. Pray heals, but not always with the miracle we ask for.

I learned a lot in 2009 from the bestseller novel, *The Shack*. It had to be self-published but sold millions of copies because it tapped so many religious questions. In that fictional treatment of the problem of suffering*,* following the murder of “Mack’s” daughter; God the Father, who is called “Papa,” says, , **“Mackenzie, you try to make sense of the world in which you live based on a very small and incomplete picture of reality. A person’s perspective of pain and suffering is like viewing a parade through the knothole of a fence…. The underlying flaw in your thinking is that you don’t think that I am good. If you really believed that I am good, you would trust me. But you don’t.” Sarayu (“the Holy Spirit” in the novel) spoke: “Mackenzie, trust is the fruit of a relationship in which you know you are loved, but because you do not really know us, you cannot trust us.”[[4]](#footnote-4)** **By the end of the story line in the novel ,Mack trusted.**

We need to learn the same lesson. Our finite minds will never solve the mystery of what John Milton in his epic poem, “Paradise Lost.” called “justifying the ways of God to man.” The missing piece of the puzzle is “trust.” If we love God, we must do what we do with a person whom we love; we must trust. **Reason is not the answer; trust is the answer.**

The causes of all these dimensions of suffering will never be explained, **but our challenge as Christians is to connect the dots of our faith and our sufferings with trust; so, we do not have a gap between them**.

My own learning curve was helped shortly after Jimmy Carter left the White House in 1980. His sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton, developed pancreatic cancer and was pronounced terminally ill. Physical healing was “popular” in that time with people like Oral Roberts, and Jimmy Swaggart, and Jim and Tammy Baker and Kathrine Kuhlman and others, **but Ms. Stapleton’s autobiography was about what she called “inner healing,” not being healed from pancreatic cancer, but being healed with pancreatic cancer.** *Now folks, it has been over forty years since I read that book and I could not find my old copy this week, but I think I have her story right.*

In her book, she solved her spiritual issue with pancreatic cancer this way: She imagined that she was on a little rowboat with a heavy bucket and a rope attached to it. She was dredging the lake of the issues of her life, pulling up questions or issues that she never resolved—old grudges, guilt, temptations to which she yielded, seasons of pain and anger, attempts to bargain with God, the price we paid for pride in thinking we were smarter or richer or better than someone else, battles we fought and won, battles we fought and lost, gossiping, and our fear of dying. All of these unresolved issues were now “muck” at the bottom of life where discarded memories, unforgiven trespasses, ghosts of other sins passed, were tossed without resolution. **All muck, junk, stuff we had along life’s journey tossed overboard, but they were still lying in our sub-subconsciousness as soul rot.**

**Then, in Mrs. Stapleton’s book, she told us that she had a second act of her vision.** She imagined that on the shore of the lake there was a grassy knoll and Jesus standing there with outstretched arms. He had nail prints in his ankles and wrist.

She imagined that she went ashore and dragged up the hill her bucket of muck she had dredged from her unresolved, unrepented, unforgiven issues of guilt and fear and bitterness and other soul rot thoughts, words, and deeds. **Then she imagined that Jesus reached out and touched her muck bucket and it became clean and bright as new. It was like cleaning up an old brass pot because brass tarnishes but is never eaten away with rust. She felt helped and healed even though pancreatic cancer roared on and took her physical life.**

 I loved the way Ruth Carter Stapleton died with inner healing. You see, for our religion to be real, our faith must connect with our muck, our sufferings, our losses, and our soul rot. **The truth is that eventually some part of all our mortal bodies will shut down that takes us from this world. Christians die at the same rate as everyone else—100% But we can leave this world with bitterness and anger or inner healing. When you and I learn that “the body of this ole house” is beyond repair, how can we still die healed? That is not a challenge for our physicians; that is a challenge for the work of the Holy Spirit in us, bringing about inner healing. Our Christian belief is that our last experience in this life will be a momentary and miraculous connection with eternity.**

Do we understand the meaning of suffering? No. But do we trust God and sense his presence through inner healing? Yes

Let us commit to memory I Corinthians 13, one of the most beloved chapters of the Bible. Paul had to admit, ‘**Now I know in part; only then shall I know *as God knows.’*** One translation reads, **“**Now we see as in a mirror or a riddle.’ Paul longed to see ‘face to face’ with the Lord” to discuss why he suffered from what he called “a thorn in the flesh.” He prayed about it but was never relieved from it. (II Corinthians 12:8-9) God’s **answer to Paul’s suffering was, “My grace is sufficient for you.”** It was then that Paul wrote “Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardship, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, I am strong.(II Cor.12:10) Dr. Baille had concluded in the lectures he never delivered that Paul, “had faith that one day he would be granted something better than faith.”

Our challenge is to have a faith that God’s grace will take us through our valleys with shadows and questions and sufferings. It is one dimension of seeing the cross as the time and place when “sorrow and love flowed mingled down.” From 1924 when the first radios went on the air until 1960, the most often requested hymn to be played was “The Old Rugged Cross.” George Bennard was the son of a West Virginia coal miner who was killed in the mine, forcing George to drop out of school and work to support his mother and younger siblings. He was converted at a Salvation Army meeting and became a Methodist preacher in Michigan, but he had no education. He was ridiculed for his English grammar and coarse manners, and left Michigan to go to Wisconsin.

Again, his preaching was criticized but he found great comfort in the scripture I read this morning and, in his suffering from criticism, he imagined in a dream that **Jesus’ cross was not beautiful brass, but rough sawn and rugged**. On January 10, 1913, he picked up his guitar and sang the hymn we are about to sing. He “made up” the lyrics and tune as he picked and sang. **He was invited to sing it on the air the first day of the local radio station’s going on the air in 1924.** To use a term, they did not know in those days, “it went viral.”

Remember as we sing it that the writer was laughed at for his lack of education and class. Note especially phrases in the hymn about the cross of Jesus as “**the emblem of suffering and shame** which was a wonderous attraction” for George Bennard. Indeed, he saw in its ruggedness and his memory of Jesus being crucified on it that **it had a “wondrous beauty” about it because from that old cross he was “pardoned and sanctified.”** **If it brought him “shame and reproach” as an unlettered preacher, he would “bear it gladly because Jesus will call him one day to a home far away where the Lord’s glory forever George would share. He would cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it some day for a crown.” The ruggedness of the cross spoke to his suffering from criticism.**

In the Zen religion, there is a proverb: “When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.” **When pain and anger and fear meet faith and hope and love, healing happens!**  Jesus’ cross enables us to experience a sense of peace and joy that the world cannot give, and suffering cannot dispel. In a Christian vision of truth, we might have to live with problems and unsolved mysteries, **but in “Our Father who art in heaven,”** we see the reality of life eternal. God’s vision for our lives only begins in this life. Every life ends with the promise of God, **‘to be concluded in the next.’[[5]](#footnote-5)**

Are we ready to be taught? Are we ready to have our soul rot cured? Are we ready to be touched and released from our chains or grief or guilt?

 In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

**Pages From My “Notebook” of Seventy Years as A Minister**

When my brilliant and honest friend, Dr. Julian Alridge, read my first chapter, he thought it needed more reflection of my own pastoral experiences. Doing that was a test of my memory of seventy years as a clergyman! He created a long and sad journey down memory lane as I recalled the most heart-breaking and theologically troubling occasion in the parishes. Camouflaging identities and locales, I have chosen to share with you thirteen times in my ministry when suffering came to me, to members of the churches I served, or to dear personal friends. Had I kept a Journal, the entries at the time of these heartaches would have been told with ink and tears. I share them in hopes that they might help you to develop a Christian vision of the “Truth that sets us free.”

**I suppose my life reflection in theology began when my 49-year-old father died the summer of my twelfth birthday.** Not only did his death rob me of his love and protective care, it left my mother and me without a home, any money, or any continuing income except a small annual rent check from some land she had inherited a quarter century earlier. On my twelfth birthday, he had called me to his bedside and given me two words of advice: “Be good to your mother and don’t waste as many years of your life as I did mine.” Forty-six days later, each with intensive pain, he died. When his cancer took him away, I remember so painfully lying in bed the night of his funeral and thinking, “All my friends have fathers; I never will again.” **However, Sunday School teachers taught me well. Since the entire repertoire of music for me was the children’s verse, “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know,” I never recall questioning God’s love even though my father was gone.**

In our Southern neighborhood, most families were “Primitive Baptists” who believed in predestination. Like Rick Warren wrote in his bestseller book in the 21st century—*Purpose Driven Life—*all our neighbors except the handful who were Methodists believed that God is in total control of conception, life events, accidents, sickness, and death. Colloquially, their theology was “what is to will be.” My mother had done her Wesleyan homework though, and she ascribed many life situations to origins other than God’s will—harmful personal habits like smoking or alcohol abuse, exposure to agricultural poison chemicals, farm accidents, DNA traits, etc. She had lived with the death of her loved ones since her own childhood. Daddy was gone, but Mama’s faith was strong. The theology she immediately taught me was simple: “Son, if we work hard, the Lord will provide.”

It is not true that one’s theology does not matter so long as you are sincere. Bad theology can do a lot of damage.

Seven years after my father’s death, when I was a college senior, I was appointed as pastor of a “mill village church” where people came home from the mill and sat on the porch. One little boy was just learning to ride a bicycle when he exhausted his strength on “mill hill,” and literally fell into the path of a car and was killed. His mother witnessed the tragedy. When I arrived another pastor had preceded me and told her that “God needed another angel.” As my foot hit the first step, the distraught mother said to me, “If you tell me that God wanted another angel, get the hell off my porch.” **So it was that at age nineteen, I had suddenly to become that village’s “theologian in residence.” I had to assure that mother the older minister was wrong-- God did not cause the bike wreck and her little boy’s death.**

After graduating from Duke Divinity School in 1958, I was sent to serve four rural churches. Visiting a newlywed one day, I was told that she had dated two young men simultaneously, had sex with both, and did not know whose baby she was carrying. Unknown to me, she also shared that confidence with an older minister. The baby was born with only one arm, and when I visited her, she said that other minister told her that God was punishing her sin by inflicting this lifelong limitation on an innocent baby. I was so glad that I had been the “reader” in seminary for a professor whose doctorate was in the Book of Ezekiel, and I had just about memorized that book of the Bible! The minute she told me of that cruel theology, I opened my Bible to Ezekiel 18:1-4): “What do you mean by repeating this proverb, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge?’ As I live, says the Lord, this proverb shall no more be used in Israel. It is only the person who sins that shall be punished.” To see that in the Bible was a great comfort to her. Her marriage lasted, the child grew and coped well with having one arm, and she thanked me many, many times. **The bottom line from that situation is that theology which changes the nature of God from our heavenly father who loves us and sent Jesus to demonstrate that love is not a God of punishment. God cannot always prevent the wages of sin from being harmful or even deadly, but those are sin’s wages, not God’s.**  Every Christian is, at times, a theologian!

God raises up someone in every church that a pastor serves who will be “a friend in need and a friend indeed.” The man who was that person in my second appointment after seminary retired early. One day he was in the back seat on a company errand with friends when an automobile accident resulted in his being totally unable to walk. They had a very comfortable home, but nothing was handicap accessible. He was so highly respected and had so many friends that with both money and free labor, a new home was built with every imaginable means of enabling him and his wife to have a comfortable, safe, and mobile lifestyle. He did not get bitter; he did not cease to be active in church, and the way they “bore t heir sorrows” and overcame adversity with grace and true grit made the rest of his life an influence for many to find, as Paul did, that God’s grace is sufficient for us to bear our burdens.

We had to examine our theology. Did God cause the car wreck? Why were others unharmed and my friend was immobilized for life? **Car wrecks happen because of driver mistakes and mechanical failures, not because of the hand of God. God does not “repeal” the laws of nature when “an irresistible force meets an immovable object.”** My friend’s widow is now ninety-seven years old and has a positive spirit; she has never grown bitter or ceased to have a great spirit—again, of grace and grit!

“Joe” was editor of the newspaper; “Joy” was the church secretary. For a long time after their marriage years earlier, they could not have children biologically; so they adopted two girls. Then “Joy” became pregnant, and they had a son who grew into a model teenager. He was a superb student, a teenager with both personality and character that made him a model young man. The state-wide baseball tournament was an eight-hour drive away at the other end of the state. “John” was in the middle of the front seat of an old-style bench seat sedan. They had driven all night. Perhaps it was the fog on the mountain or perhaps the driver dropped off to sleep, but “John” was killed instantly.

Some came to advise his parents that “it was John’s time to go.” Others wondered why John was the only one of the six to die. Where was God? His father never ceased to support high school sports events or to give newspaper coverage to young athletes. His mother thereafter seemed to laugh less and be more pensive, but she kept working, kept believing in God’s love, kept coming to church, and simply “soldiered on.” **I had long conversations with both parents; they did not blame God.**

In 2002 Rick Warren, pastor of the “Saddleback Baptist megachurch” in California wrote a book that almost outsold the Bible for several years—*The Purpose Driven Life*. Millions adopted his theology:

“Because God made you for a reason, He chose the exact time of your birth and death. God left no detail to chance—the ‘custom you’ he had in mind. Parents might not have planned you, but you are not unplanned by God. God does nothing accidentally, and he never makes mistakes.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Don’t forget that his theology makes every child with any atypical chromosome arrangement, any child born with physical or mental challenges, any child whose mother was a cocaine addict during her entire pregnancy and the child’s birth, and any parental environment which might include abuse or molestation must still be controlled by God’s predestined will. Warren quoted a poem by Russell Kelfer, “You look like you look for a reason; our God made no mistake…you’re just want he wanted to make…Your parents were custom designed with God’s plan in mind….”[[7]](#footnote-7)

As is true for almost anything we are wanting to prove from the Bible, Dr. Warren found Psalm 139:16— “In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.” Sadly, in 2013, Rick and Kay Warren’s son, Matthew, committed suicide. **Did God predestine the suicide?** Kay was diagnosed with breast cancer and has had every treatment known to humankind to postpone her death. **Were the millions who read that God plans every detail of life and death misled?**  Why did she have chemotherapy and radiation if the exact date of her death was predestined the day she was conceived, as Warren wrote in his book that he said made him fifteen million dollars in profit?[[8]](#footnote-8) On a television talk show after those two tragedies in the Warren family’s life, Dr. Warren said, “I have had to re-think some of my theology.” *(I have never been able to find that confession in print.)*

To make God the cause of every human action from conception to death, every personal accident or national event is to make humans like “marionettes on a string” with God pulling all the strings. I dissent

In the 1970’s two young doctors rented the same beach house on back-to-back weeks every summer. When the second family arrived, their first morning was spent crossing a small inlet and collecting sand-dollars on a small island. At low tide the inlet water was knee deep; at high tide, it was over an adult’s head. On the day of the tragedy there were two grandparents, two parents, and four children having their best day ever collecting sand dollars. The family physician, his wife, the 16-year-old son, and the 10 and 12- year-old sons could swim. “Grandma” and the 4-year-old could not. “Grandpa had worn laced up slippers that took too much water for him to swim, and he drowned. The doctor saved his mother but was so fatigued that he drowned. His physician partner and I arrived about 2:00 a.m. just as bodies were being recovered. I walked the beach with the 16-year-old son until sunup over the Atlantic Ocean. I had the double funeral a few days later.

The survivors of that tragedy have had to “walk back through” that tragedy as they re-shaped their own lives without their husband/father who, as a family doctor, never sent but one “statement” for medical services rendered. All four children are wonderful adults. Their theology as Methodist followers of “Jacob Arminius” has relieved them of the emotional and religious burden of blaming God. **They simply stayed too long and were victims of an ocean tide that has been rising and falling since the morning of creation.** They know that God’s name and God’s nature is just what John the Elder told us it was in I John 4:8-19.

There was no hint of impending tragedy when I visited “Matt” and “Sherry” one afternoon in their lovely suburban home. They were young adult leaders in our church. The back yard was filled with umbrellas that he had hand-painted for an airline. As soon as they dried, he would deliver them. Then they and the two little children were going to college Homecoming for their alma mater. A drunk driver abruptly crossed the road, and the head-on collision killed the family of four. I met the next day with about fifty neighbors who filled the basement of a home. Most of them had very minimal deep Christian thought or church involvement. They all had one question: “Why?” Why did God allow this? Where was God when the steering wheel took the drunken driver’s car across the center line? The answer is that when we read in Genesis 1:27 that we are made in God’s own image, that means that we have much latitude in our decisions. As Dr. Nido Qubein, president of High Point University, often tells students, Bad choices made bad consequences; good choices make good consequences.” He concludes his recent book, “Life is all about choices. So, be wise [[9]](#footnote-9)

The winter of 1996 was brutal in the Appalachian Mountains. One day, by mid afternoon, the snow was falling so fiercely that I told the staff our of 220-member church to go home early. I was there alone when the phone rang. It was the regional hospital calling to say that an electric lineman had died following an accident and his wife gave ours as their church home. They gave me a home address and said she was leaving for home then—about thirty miles away. The roads were getting difficult, but I made my way to the home. A large man came to the kitchen door. I told him the family home I was looking for, and he said his son lived there. I told him how sorry I was about the accident. He knew nothing. When I explained, he left the door open and began grabbing kitchen chairs and throwing them against the walls where they broke into splinters. After they were all demolished, he apologized and invited me in. He introduced himself as a Seneca Indian from New York state who was in North Carolina on a visit.

Shortly, friends whom she had called began coming in. Dishes were piled on the kitchen counter. When some began to clean there, others reported the beds as unmade and began tidying up the house. The young widow arrived and apologized for giving our church name because they had never registered in the few times they worshipped as guests. She said they knew the danger of his work and every night at bedtime, they played Bruce Springsteen’s “The Other Side.” She wanted it played at the funeral where the organist used only “high church” liturgical music at the organ.

The snow ended up being two feet deep. Power companies from four states sent repair crews; all stopped work for two hours to attend the funeral. Ladies of the church prepared 1500 sandwiches and we fed the workers lunch. The tragedy was terrible, but the occasion for witness with a “Christian vision for the truth that sets us free” was far-reaching. I had cards and calls for weeks wanting a copy of my eulogy when spoke to the issue, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” The man thought the power was off when he began re-attaching a ruptured line. He was electrocuted in his “cherry picker.”

Two of the shocking deaths in the later years of my ministry were men who died without any hint of being near the end of life, leaving their families children in a state of shock and theological confusion. One was fifty-eight and died in his sleep with no symptoms of illness other than bronchitis. The other opened the door to his home and fell forward, never to regain consciousness. There was no autopsy for either; so, the medical reasons for their premature deaths remained a mystery. Tod and Rusty. “Noel” was one of the kindest, gentlest and most brilliant men I ever know. His only child was a senior in high school. I had heard his marriage vows years earlier and known him since his boyhood days. “William” was technically retired as a social worker but was advisor to a “Junior ROTC” high school unit, a pillar in his church, and father of three outstanding children. At “William’s” funeral over fifty uniformed teenagers filled the remaining pews and then stood for the entire service. Several stood, unprompted, to how their lives had been rescued or changed because of “William’s” interest in them and support of them.

For the first of these men who died so unexpectedly and quickly, there was a memorial service that reflected thanksgiving for his life, grief upon his death, but human morality as the only cause. His family did discover that he had been advised of some “danger signals” that he had not shared. Basically, his heart simply stopped, but not by an “act of God.” For octogenarian parents to lose a son in his “fifties” is a difficult burden to bear, but with faith and friends and other family, they are soldiering on. The church service was uplifting and theologically reflective of our being mortal and God’s being loving.

For the second of these men, the family called on a friend who, late in his own life, became a minister. He is a fine man and led the only church he served from near closure to over two hundred in attendance. However, at the funeral, he looked down on a widow in her fifties, two grown daughters one of whom was to be married, to be escorted in on her father’s arm, and a grown son. To that closely knit and loving family, the visiting preacher said, “God needed him more than you did!” I was shocked, saddened, and almost angered at these words. It will certainly make regaining their own faith more difficult.

The other two people whom I must include in this list did not die sudden or tragic deaths. Both were LGBTQ persons who had confided their sexual preference to me years earlier. One was a childhood playmate with whom I played checkers, chess, and occasionally helped him “run” his family country store when his father was too drunk to function. I knew he was effeminate in mannerisms and played no sports, but actually in the 1940’s knew nothing about homosexuality. In college he was arrested in a hotel restroom and sentenced to jail for “crime against nature.” His parents’ plea bargained for him to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital and I borrowed a car and went to see him from my college campus. The only conversation I remember from that visit other than to express my sympathy for arrest was his saying, “It takes one to know one.” He transferred, finished college and became a CPA with an excellent practice. We lost touch, but years later I was called by his cousin to conduct his graveside rites back in the rural church cemetery where we had both gone to Sunday School as children and youth. Only four people came—his “partner,” a first cousin, the church’s incumbent pastor and me. What a sad commentary on the life of an honorable man who at some early time in life learned that he did not like his masculinity.

When I was in college, the graduate of a junior college transferred to a senior college where he could complete his baccalaureate degree. His call was to ordained ministry. He immediately made friends of everyone and was elected by his peers to a student government office and as editor of the college annual in 1955. He loved basketball and was a good player in “shirts and skins” pick-up games in the gym. Four of us guys rented an apartment together and all of us on weekends went to serve ‘student appointments.” I preached a revival for him, and he was very well liked as a pastor. He left seminary to become a high school teacher where he was advisor to the annual and beloved as a history teacher. Soon after my own seminary graduation, he visited Joan and me overnight. After she went to bed, he told me for the first time that he was gay. We affirmed that our friendship would remain intact. Later he called to say he wanted to “rescue” a young woman from poverty and social rejection because she had a child out of wedlock. I heard their marriage vows. I guided him in buying a home. Without a sexual relationship except for the conception of one child, their marriage remained intact until her early death. We continued our friendship until his early death from “kidney failure.” I had the eulogy at his funeral. The large church was packed. Over twenty people stood in their pews to say that without his encouragement, they would never have finished high school. One who stood became a medical doctor; one became an Episcopal priest. In all my years of ministry, I never heard so many people say that the deceased helped them salvage their lives. My guess is that none of them knew the secret he lived with from his college years.

Let us remember the Zen proverb: “When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.” My role as “teacher” was limited to some biblical texts affirming God’s unconditional love. My favorite to which I introduced them all was Matthew 7, the closing section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. To the mysteries of life he taught us, “Everyone who asks receives, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”(Matthew 7:8) Then he taught us about the nature of God: “Is there anyone among you, who if your child asks for bread will give him a stone? Or if the child asks you for fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are sinners, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.” (Matthew 7:9-11)

Am I like those who “cherry pick” scriptures to support their belief that God is the “Divine punisher” rather than one whose name and unfailing nature is love? To a degree yes, I am being selective, but I am choosing a passage from the greatest sermon ever delivered by the only perfect person who ever lived. As for I John 4, New Testament scholars increasingly agree that the author was one of the Twelve Disciples, the only one who was present at the cross and the one who wrote the Gospel of John.

“When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.” All scripture is not equal. Jesus often said, “You have heard it said of old…” In hi (*and he quoted from the Hebrew Bible*) “but I say to you….” *(cf. Matthew 5:21 and other passages)* In his closing discourse remembered and recorded by John, Jesus said, “I am not asking that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the Evil One. They do not belong to the world just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your Word is truth….As you Father, are in me and I am in you, may they be in us….I made your name known so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.” (John 17:15-26, sel. vss.)

Father Juan Arias of Brazil is a Missionary of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, received the “Cross of Merit” in Spain, and is secretary-general in the Vatican. His book, *The God I Don’t Believe In* is not my only teacher, for sure, but I share some of his concerns about postures attributed to our Heavenly Father.

Arias writes, “No, I shall never believe in,

…the God who condemns all material things, the God who makes himself more feared than loved, the God who enjoys condemning us, the God who ‘sends’ people to hell, the God who demands that we make ‘100’ on all life tests, the God who can be full explained by philosophy, the God who says, ‘You’ll pay for that!’, the God who feels no pain from our agonizing problems of suffering, the God who prefers purity to love, the God who does not engender hope in me, the God who is incapable of making everything new, or the God who is incapable of captivating my heart, giving him my life issues, and calling him ‘Abba’ or ‘Father.’”[[10]](#footnote-10)

In Jesus, the Teacher has come. When any scripture passage seems to reflect God’s wrath and punishment, turn to the Teacher! When tragedy or devastating heartache comes, and it has or it will, let Jesus be your Teacher!

1. Op. Cit. Powell, 114 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ferré, Nels F.S., *Making Religion Real,* Harper & Brothers, 1955, 143 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. 138 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Young, William, The *Shack,* Windblown press, 2009, 126 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ferré, Nels F.S., *Making Religion Real,* Harper, 1955, 151 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Warren, Rick, *The Purpose Driven Life,* Zondervan, 2002, 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Internet [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Qubein, Nido, *Extraordinary Transformation,* High Point University, 2024, 253 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Arias, Juan, *The God I Don’t Believe In,* Abbey Press, 1973, excerpts from 196-199 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)