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WHY DO THE GOOD DIE YOUNG?

Romans 14:8

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When I first conceived of this sermon series I thought it might be a good break from the lectionary and an opportunity, during the summer, to engage in some lighter material. I imagined you might pose some curious questions that would be fun for all of us to dive in together.

But, very quickly, I found the questions you wanted addressed were right at the very heart of our faith and some of your deepest struggles in life.

Today we will deal with perhaps the most difficult and personally-challenging question that you have asked and that people of faith have struggled with for millennia:

Why do the good die young?

It is a question as old as humanity itself. It grows from an internal sense that there is something wrong with the world. That suffering and death are not meant to be a part of this life. That we were created for something greater than a few decades of a mixture of happiness, grief, joy, and loss.

Even so, when somebody has lived a full life there is a sense of completeness. When that loved one passed from this life to the next, we find comfort in our grief.

But, when people are taken early in life, before they can even experience the full measure of what this brief existence has to offer, it feels like the universe has cheated them. It seems to us that the very least an all-powerful and all-loving God could do for us would be a guarantee of sorts – a guarantee that every person gets to live out a certain measure of what we might call *a full life*.

There are four boys in my family but there is a fifth child, a daughter, Rachel. Rachel died when she was only a few days old. Some 51 years later, I still want to know what is Rachel like. I still feel cheated. I want to know how her presence would

have made growing up in a household with four boys different? As a teenager I wanted to know silly things like, “Would she have helped me meet cute girls in high school?”

“Why do the good die young” is question that has led to many different answers. Such unjust deaths erode our sense of God’s justice and power. In fact, Billy Joel’s song, “*Only the good die young*” centers around this problem. The song is trying to convince a young lady to engage in carnal activities. The justification is that chastity does not matter because God can’t exist, since the good die young all the time!

In the face of this question, even Biblical authors have been utterly confounded. The author of Ecclesiastes simply threw his hands up and said, “It’s all vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). So, to propose that we’re going to spend a few minutes this morning and come up with the answer is, in itself, an exercise in naïveté. I also want to make it clear that I don’t think there is a single right answer to this question; to fully explore, even the biblical thoughts, would take us years.

Having said that, by the end of the sermon we will have an answer to our question. It is an answer that at times might bring you great comfort and at other times might leave you frustrated and confused. For this answer we turn to the story of Lazarus.

We all know that the shortest verse in the Bible is one of the most powerful. When Jesus saw all the grief from Lazarus’ death, he wept (John 11:35). Jesus was touched by their sorrow and, so, he raised Lazarus from the dead. Whether or not we ever obtain what we feel is a satisfactory answer to our question, we can gain comfort that Jesus cares.

An implicit assumption within our question is that the person who dies young has been cheated

out of the blessings of a full life. And, that if God was appropriately acting godly, some dramatic action would be taken – such as in the Lazarus story.

However, in rereading this passage, a question occurred to me. Did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead out of compassion for Lazarus? - or for his loved ones? In other words, did Lazarus' early death rob him of some essential experience that Jesus wanted to restore for him? - or was Jesus motivated by something else?

If it was to help Lazarus, then we are forced to ask ourselves "Why did Jesus delay?" A detail that John specifically points out, showing that he shares our frustration, as did Lazarus's sisters, who both went to Jesus saying, "If you had been here he would not have died."

Their questions reflect the same sentiment our question does today, "God, why do you let the good die young?!"

Jesus' rationale does not offer much comfort. In fact, it may add to our frustration.

It is clear Jesus intended to delay so that Lazarus would suffer death and, in turn, he could raise him from the dead, leading people to believe in his power. Jesus says precisely this to the disciples. The "illness is for God's glory, so that the Son of God might be glorified through it." (John 11:4)

Never once does the Gospel of John, or Jesus' words, ever indicate that the raising of Lazarus was meant to benefit Lazarus himself. Rather, it was done to demonstrate Jesus' power over death and out of compassion for those who loved Lazarus. Jesus weeps when he sees the grief of the crowd, not upon hearing of Lazarus' death. Thus, our assumption that God's solution, to those good people who suffer an early death, should be a longer life is cast into doubt. In fact, under certain conditions, Isaiah claims the opposite!

It's a rather shocking statement that has to do with the events taking place at the time. It was a time of war, a time of tragedy, a time of treachery,

and a time of great loss for the people of Israel. Isaiah declares, "the devout are taken away and nobody understands." (Isaiah 57:1) Just like today, when the good die young, we simply don't understand it. But Isaiah continues "for the righteous are taken away from calamity and they enter into peace." (Isaiah 57:1-2) Isaiah is suggesting that these righteous people were better off to be taken early, rather than to endure all the calamities Israel was facing.

We must be very careful. Isaiah's thoughts are not meant to be a universal answer to our question. We know that, at times, God explicitly keeps servants to endure suffering and challenge in order to accomplish his purposes. We know Paul yearned to go be with God in heaven, but God delayed so that Paul could continue his ministry. The example in Isaiah 57 claims that God has other purposes in mind than simply making this world the best it can be for everyone. God has greater aims than we have for ourselves.

It's true the Bible makes it clear that death is not a part of God's original plan for us or for creation. Paul tells us death is the enemy. In fact, that it is the final enemy. But Paul also tells us, and if we believe it then his answer matters, that God has conquered this death; that Jesus has defeated it. That it no longer has any sting to it.

When I was nine years old, I contracted a disease called septic arthritis. It took three different hospitals to figure out what was wrong with me. Still today, I don't know much about the disease, but I do know – at least from what I was told – is that it is an infection that if it continues to go through your body, it can not only devastate you, but it can kill you. After the third hospital figured out what was wrong with me, they were getting ready to put me in an ambulance to a fourth hospital to take me to surgery – immediately. As my mother was filling out the hospital's surgical release form, she got to the part that releases the hospital from any liability "in case of patient's death". She hesitated. Then she learned that there was a surgeon on the other end – at the fourth hospital –

that understood this disease and had successfully treated this disease. Everyone that my mother knew at the Georgetown Medical Center had tremendous confidence in that surgeon. Even though she didn't know what was going to happen during the surgery, even though I would be completely unaware of what was going on, she signed that piece of paper because she trusted that the surgeon was going to take care of me. The sting of the fear that my mother was experiencing was taken away.

That's why, in the 14th chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul writes, *"If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."*

That is the Bible's answer to our question.

"God, Why do the good die young? Why do you allow that to happen?"

"Because, though it may not seem it to you, (and I understand that) whether you live or whether you die, you are in my hands."

For those of us who live, God is saying, "I am with you."

God realizes that, even though death no longer has any eternal sting, there is still that sting of loss. That tragic loss means that we will never get to live out our days with our beloved spouse, that we will never get to raise that precious child into adulthood, that we will never get to see what our only sister was like.

For those of us that are left behind, God is saying, "I understand your fear. I understand your sense of loss and I send you the Holy Spirit to be your comforter and your strength. But, even more, I send you hope. Because I promise, in ways you cannot understand, that I am with your loved ones every step of the way, they too are in my hands. I promise, as I did in the Psalms, that when they pass through the valley of the shadow of death, they need not fear. And I promise, as I did in Isaiah, that when they pass through the waters, and the fires, I am with them."

God is telling us that he is with our loved ones, as he promised in the Psalms, when they go through this final stage from here to the next life – when they walk through the valley of the shadow of death – they need not have any fear.

Ultimately, God's answer to the tragedy of an early death is not a longer life here, but a new life. A new body, a life in the heavens with God where there is no more pain and no more sorrow. Where death is no more! Where we need no longer fear for our loved one. Where we can be assured they are in the best hands possible. They are at peace.

That is the good news of the gospel! That Jesus Christ has risen! And that his life gives us life eternal.

Thanks be to God.