

# TWO TREES IN THE GARDEN

Elie Wiesel was just a boy when he was taken to a Nazi concentration camp. During World War II, the Germans gathered up as many Jews as they could find and put them in these death camps. By the end of the war, six million Jews had been murdered. Elie was one of the few survivors.

One day Elie noticed three hanging ropes set up in the assembly place. One of the people to be hung was a small boy. He writes, "The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses . . . 'Where is God? Where is He?' someone behind me asked."

As the three dropped, the two adults died almost immediately, but the young boy was so light that "for more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. . . .

"Behind me I heard the same man asking: 'Where is God now?'

"And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows.' "

From NIGHT by Elie Wiesel (New York: Avon Books, 1969).

## 3 STATEMENTS

- Even though evil is all around, the Bible is clear that God's creation is good.
- God comes seeking to provide for us and to protect us.
- The almighty God shares our pain with a powerful presence.

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*Source*

## WHERE DID EVIL COME FROM?

You don't have to be in a concentration camp to know that life is sometimes painful. *Even though evil is all around, the Bible is clear that God's creation is good.* But when friends are cruel, when home life is unfair, or when someone you love dies, then you too might ask, "Where is God now?"

If God's creation is good, as we are told in Genesis 1:31, then where did evil come from?

If God's creation is good, why do so many people starve to death every year?

If God's creation is good, why do you sometimes hurt inside?

The Bible doesn't try to answer all our questions about evil and suffering. The Bible does, however, give us some guidance.

We first hear about evil and suffering and death in the story of Adam and Eve.

God planted a garden in Eden. In the garden there were two special trees: the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Adam and Eve could eat from any tree, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God told them if they ate of that tree, they would die.

Then along came a serpent who told a lie: if Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree, they would not die, but would be like God. (You might ask where an evil serpent came from if cre-

ation was good, but the Bible doesn't tell us.) The fruit looked good and the idea of knowledge was tempting, so Adam and Eve disobeyed and ate it.

Suddenly their innocence was lost; they knew the difference between good and evil. Suddenly they were ashamed and knew they were naked. Suddenly—and this was the saddest thing of all—they were separated from God and hid themselves among trees.

But look what God does. God comes looking! When we play hide and seek with God, God is always "it." God always comes looking to find us when we hide or separate ourselves from God because of sin.

"Where are you?" God asks. Like Adam and Eve, we try to blame others, but we stand responsible. We have separated ourselves from God. We have not loved God with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

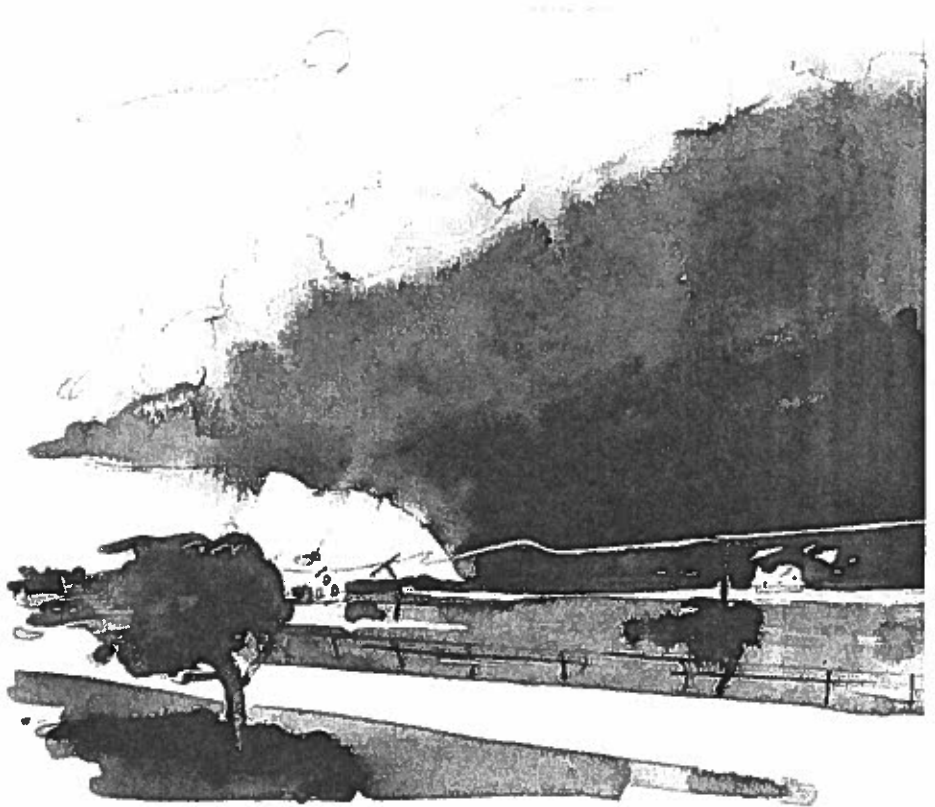
Our actions have consequences. God sadly told Adam and Eve that their lives would be full of toil, suffering, and death.

But don't think God went looking for them just to remind them of their new problems. God came seeking out of love and mercy; God came to provide. The Bible may leave us with many questions about where evil came from but it is clear about the God who loves us. God gave Adam and Eve clothing to cover their nakedness. With that simple gesture, God showed care for Adam and Eve. With that simple gesture, God is saying you too will be cared for. God provides for you. God loves you.

The story of Adam and Eve ends with God sadly closing access to the garden. The people are now separated from the tree of life. And Adam and Eve walk slowly into a world of suffering and death.

We still don't know where evil came from. God's good creation somehow has become a fallen one—a broken world. That is not what God intended.

But we *do* know that God has not abandoned us. While we were yet sinners, God loved us. *God comes, seeking to provide for us and to protect us.*



## WHAT'S GOD DOING?

There is much suffering in our world and too often it is all blamed on God. Even insurance companies call catastrophes an "act of God," as if God chooses to wipe out a village in an earthquake.

One thing is certain: you will suffer in your life. Perhaps you already know what it's like to hurt deeply. If you haven't suffered yet, you will. And when that happens it isn't God who is doing it to you. To help you think it through, here is a list of three possible causes of suffering.

A. *I sinned.* My mother told me not to put my hand on the hot stove. I disobeyed and burnt my fingers. My mother's commandment was given to protect me. My burnt fingers are not my punishment; they are the result of my disobedience.

B. *Someone else sinned.* Some people wanted the money in my billfold and they beat me up to get it. God gave

*Even though evil is all around, the Bible is clear that God's creation is good.*

us commandments against stealing and hurting in order to protect us all. The muggers disobeyed and now I hurt all over.

C. *The world is a fallen world.* My friend was just killed in a car accident. It was really nobody's fault. It all happened too fast. We live in a fallen world where bad things happen, where things get broken, where life is fragile. God didn't cause my friend's death. God never intended life to be like this.

Here are some Bible passages. In front of each passage, place the letter from the suffering list above that you feel best describes the cause of the suffering.

- \_\_\_ 1. Luke 13:1-5
- \_\_\_ 2. Acts 6:8-14; 7:58-60
- \_\_\_ 3. Genesis 4:8-16

**God comes, seeking to provide for us and to protect us.**

When we see evil and suffering in this world, God doesn't seem to be so almighty. But God is almighty, all right. *The almighty God shares our pain with a powerful presence.* We may not have answers to all our questions, but we have a God who in Jesus Christ has entered into our suffering and taken on our death. You will learn more about this in the next session.

### I THINK

Take some time to think about the pain in your life. Think about some of the times you have suffered. Using the three categories from the previous activity, try to determine the cause of that pain. Was it (A) because you sinned? Was it (B) because someone else sinned? Was it (C) just because we live in a fallen and broken world?

## Shaping life

### CARETAKERS OR CARELESS TAKERS?

One of the ways humans were to reflect being created in God's image was



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to take care of nature. Just as God was a caretaker, so Adam and Eve were to take care of nature.

But something went wrong. Humans were created to reflect the image of a protecting, caretaking God, but sin shattered the image. Instead of God-like caretakers, humans have become careless takers.

Just look at our environment. We have selfishly taken and taken, destroying oxygen-supplying rain forests. We have carelessly dumped pollutants into our air and water. We have ruthlessly taken animals, using them to the point of near extinction.

Are governments to blame for not regulating industry better? Sure, but industry produces only 15% of the smog; the cars we choose to drive produce 40%! Are industries to blame? Sure, but industry is responsible for only 9% of the pollutants flowing into the rivers; 65% comes from sources like chemicals used on our farms and our city lawns.

Our environment is in such a state of emergency that it will have to be the major international issue of the twenty-first century. If not, some people fear our world will not easily support human life any longer.

Source: NEWSWEEK, July 24, 1989.

The condition of our environment reflects one example of the ways we are more careless takers than caretakers. How can you be a caretaker of the environment? Check the statements you think you could make an effort to do.

- \_\_\_ Find out about recycling programs operating in your community.
- \_\_\_ Don't throw litter on the ground.
- \_\_\_ Recycle aluminum cans.
- \_\_\_ Pick up litter when you see it.
- \_\_\_ Take shorter showers.
- \_\_\_ Turn water off while brushing teeth.
- \_\_\_ Walk or ride your bike when possible.
- \_\_\_ Set up a newspaper or aluminum collection point in your congregation.
- \_\_\_ Turn off lights and appliances when not in use.
- \_\_\_ Ask others to be concerned for the environment.
- \_\_\_ Encourage governmental representatives to protect the environment (write letters to them about certain issues).
- \_\_\_ Participate in a neighborhood clean-up.
- \_\_\_ Encourage your congregation to use reusable or recyclable cups and plates.

## GRACE AND RESPONSE

Think of all God has done for you! When Martin Luther tried to list it all in his explanation to the First Article, he realized that God does all this "out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve it." That is grace—the way God loves us and cares for us even when we don't deserve it.

Once you know the depth of God's grace, you can't help but respond out of gratitude.

That's all part of the image of God that God has given you. You can reflect the love of God. You can love God back! You have been given the *ability* to *respond*.

That means that you have *response-ability!*

Luther felt it instinctively: "Therefore I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey him." Session 17 focused on thanking and praising God.

But how can we serve and obey? Let God work through you for a more caring world. Let God help you to become a more caring person.

To help you think about how you can respond to the grace of God, write four short notes to God.

Tell God how thankful you are:

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Praise God's greatness:

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Tell God how you will serve:

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Tell God how you will obey:

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*The almighty God shares our pain with a powerful presence.*



KATHRYN BELLIFEMINE/JUNICORN

## FURTHER

# opportunities

### *Bible Reading*

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he talked about suffering. Read Romans 8:18-25. Try to write in your own words what Paul is saying. Write down any thoughts that you had as you read this passage.

### *Memory*

Continue memorizing Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. As an additional challenge, memorize one or more of the following: Romans 5:8; Romans 6:23; Romans 8:28; Colossians 3:9-10.

### *Activity 1*

Begin keeping a journal or diary. Among other things, write about some of the ways you're hurting, and the ways in which God heals those hurts. Don't be surprised if you don't see God's hand at work as soon as

you have a problem. Sometimes it takes weeks or months before you are able to look back and see how God was helping you through.

### *Activity 2*

Greenpeace is a non-profit organization interested in environmental concerns. The organization has mounted a worldwide campaign to curb pollution and increase energy efficiency. If you are interested in learning more about what you can do to help, write to Greenpeace, 1436 U Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20009.

### *Activity 3*

There is much suffering in our world. Individually, or as a class, make a project of studying hunger in our world. Your teacher may have some resources for you. You could write to the ELCA Hunger Program, 8765 West Higgins Road, Chicago, Illinois 60631 or the GLCIC Hunger Program, 1512 St. James Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3H 0L2.

## FOCUS

### ON SATANISM

The Bible speaks clearly about the reality of evil. In the latter books of the Old Testament and in the New Testament, the world is pictured as a battleground between Satan's forces and God—between good and evil. At the end of time, God will triumph. In the meantime, however, a crucial battle rages. The powers of evil continue to challenge God.

Satanism is the worship of and devotion to Satan. Satan embodies evil.

Satanism means active and conscious opposition to God's purposes.

Since Judeo-Christian values shape our culture, Satanism offers a means for someone to rebel against society. This expression of rebellion forms a big part of Satanism's attraction.

Personal power is another drawing card for the movement.

Christianity speaks of loving our neighbor and serving others. Satanism talks about controlling others and gaining supernatural powers to use as you wish.