

## SPARROWS

*“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”*

I want to begin with an acknowledgement concerning our bulletin covers. I think most of our Sunday School families know this, but I bet many others of you do not. Each week our cover is hand designed and drawn by our own artist in residence, Rhoda Tews. Rhoda reads through all the texts for the week and puts to paper the images that come to her mind in a light pencil drawing on tracing paper. She then takes the image that grabs her the most – sometimes more than one – transfers it (or them) to a square piece of paper and finishes it into a beautiful and memorable piece of art that reflects, and often includes the text.

After they appear on the cover, she then takes the drawing and appends it to a square tile – here’s a few examples – and makes it into a wall hanging which we distribute to members of the congregation, at her request, free of charge. We began, this year, with every student in our Sunday School.

They’re wonderful, aren’t they? And no other church in America has these. Only us. Someday you will probably be offered one, and I suggest you use it in your home to highlight the promises of God and His love for your family.

Anyway, the reason I bring this up is because her artwork on today’s bulletin irritated me. Does it irritate you? Let me explain, cause it has nothing at all to do with Rhoda somehow misrepresenting branches or birds or the words of Jesus. Her artwork is, as always, stellar. But here’s why it irritated me. It quotes, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny. Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.” I looked at the picture of those happy birds and I imagined one of them falling to the ground, dead – for whatever reason – maybe a cat, maybe a disease, maybe a fire –and I thought to myself, “this can’t happen *apart from the will of the Father?*” What does that mean? That it’s God’s will for this one here is to have a happy life and tweet his way unto eternity, flapping happily in the wind without distraction, difficulty and pain – but that it’s God’s will for this one here is to drop over of a premature heart attack, or to suffer through a cat attack, or to be whisked into oblivion by the house fire?

And, if that's true of the birds, who are NOT the crown of God's creation – Jesus implies, it must also be true of us – that nothing which happens to us, happens to us outside of God's will for us. Which means that God is not only in command of all the good that happens in the world. But He also has to make choices concerning the seemingly evil things, troubling things, horrific things.

It means that things like the bombing in London, the shootings in Florida, the killing of Christians in Egypt – that suffering, hardship, pain and persecution are subject to the divine will of God and that He chooses to allow them even though they may be, in some cases, evil and awful and despicable and dastardly.

It irritates me because this does not fit into my neat little Christian box that God is responsible for all the good, all the happy, all the benevolent things that we know and enjoy, but that Satan is responsible for all the evil, and pain, and suffering. A clear good versus evil scenario – right versus wrong situation.

But this passage suggests that the evil COULD NOT HAPPEN were it not for God's will that allowed it. Suffering, pain, and death would not occur outside God's decision to permit them. So, that means, in short, He could have stopped that bird from dying. And if He could have stopped that bird from dying, then He could certainly have thwarted things like gunshots and cancer and ISIS attacks and floods and famines and AIDS and so on and so on.

So WHY DOESN'T HE? This is what irritates me. It seems to my logical human wisdom that if God COULD stop evil, and God is always good, that He SHOULD stop evil every single time. And yet He doesn't.

This is the trouble Jeremiah's dealing with in the Old Testament too. He is struggling with the same questions. Look how he begins: "O Lord, you deceived me... you overpowered me and prevailed." What? Why would God's prophet say that he was deceived by God? Well, because the prophet is faithfully proclaiming God's message, and yet his reward for it is to be mocked, mistreated, and ignored. And yet God had promised that He would be with the prophet – and Jeremiah thought that meant he wouldn't have to suffer, that he wouldn't be mistreated and ignored. But God didn't. Jeremiah did suffer despite his faithfulness.

So how do we deal with a God whose way of working doesn't halt all evil or prohibit all suffering even though He could? How do we deal with a God who seemingly chooses to not hold back things that could hurt and harm?

Three concepts from our texts help me in this regard. Three ideas help me not to be so irritated. Maybe they will help you too.

1. God knows the bigger picture. Our text says, "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master." This leads me to understand that, while God doesn't choose to halt or protect us from all evil and harm, that He does know how to orchestrate or coordinate even those things for our good.

Imagine, for instance, a master chess player. The man can see fifty moves ahead and knows that sacrificing this pawn or this rook will ultimately win the victory. God knows how to mold and shape us to prepare us for our life on earth and our forever in eternity. That which He allows, ultimately, while it may even include evil, He still will use, somehow, in some way, for good.

Think of the cross. It is most certainly evil and sin that took Jesus there. Jealousy, hatred, pride, anger – Satan was hard at work and his evil minions were wrecking havoc all over the place. But God's plan was a better one, and He knew that by allowing Jesus to go through evil, that He would ultimately prevail over all of Satan's plans. And so God permitted the Devil to seemingly have his way, so that, in the end, God would prevail.

Bigger picture: the chess maneuver. God knows the bigger picture.

2. Evil is debatable. The Jeremiah text says, "I hear many whispering, 'Terror on every side.' All my friends are waiting for me to slip. 'Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge.'"

Jeremiah's temptation seems to be to hear the voices of his detractors and to choose to see God inflicting evil on him. Being the cause of evil. But Jeremiah is not deceived. He knows that sometimes what seems like evil, in truth, is not. It only seems like evil because it's hard. Consider the long distance runner. Is it evil when his body hurts and his lungs are

overworked as he prepares for a long race? It might seem like it to him as he is in the middle of his workout. But in the end, this was discipline, and it helped build up his strength.

Jeremiah knows that whenever God is the direct cause of hardship or difficulty that it is NOT evil. It is meant to build strength and character either in the person who experiences it or in those to whom he ministers. On the other hand, if God ALLOWS evil, even then He must have in mind to somehow twist Satan's designs so that they do not undermine His own.

In short, Evil is debatable. The world may view some things that God does to us as evil. But what God CAUSES is never evil, because God Himself cannot sin. And even the evil He sometimes permits is not allowed by God so that it undermines or destroys us. Rather, as we trust in Jesus as our King and Savior, God will even use Satan's actions against Satan's own designs.

3. Finally. God is the ultimate victor. The last verse of our Jeremiah text says, "But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced."

Our Gospel text also says, "Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. ...Don't be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows."

The message: that whatever discipline God may enact or whatever evil or suffering God may permit, He IS the ultimate victor – that, when we are IN CHRIST, there is no horrible thing or no evil experience that can steal that which is most important – our eternal future with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah was able to keep on speaking God's Word because He knew that God was faithful to his promises and that ultimately He would use Jeremiah to accomplish good despite the evil he would endure.

Same with us. We know God's character. He is a God of love and grace and mercy. He is a God of compassion, generosity, and forgiveness. And, ultimately, He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and present everywhere. We don't have all the answers as to why He causes certain things and allows this and that. But we DO know that He sent His only begotten Son to suffer

the worst indignity anyone has ever experienced so that He could win us back from the grip of evil and take us ultimately to be with Him forever.

And so we hold on – whatever we face – with the firmest, fullest confidence that God will triumph over our cancer, or over our financial difficulties, or over our family problems, or over our pain, or over whatever it is. Because He proved His commitment to our care when He offered up Himself.

God will win the ultimate victory.

What does tomorrow hold? We never know. Some will be greatly blessed and will prosper in ways unimaginable, but others will falter and struggle and experience pain and hardship. The truth is, in the fallen and sinful world we know that sin will rear its ugly consequences over and over again, and so we cannot be sure that tomorrow will day a day to bring happiness and joy or struggle and hardship. But we do know this:

1. God knows and sees the bigger picture.
2. What is evil is sometimes hard to determine. God may sometimes use hardship to strengthen us. But even if he allows evil to wreck havoc, He promises that He will be there to offer what we need.
3. God will win the ultimate victory. In Christ, He has proven his unyielding commitment to our care.