



**Issues, Etc.**<sup>TM</sup>

*Christ-Centered Cross-Focused Talk Radio*

## TRANSCRIPT

*Rev. Todd Wilken, Host*

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### "Why Do Bad Things Happen?"

**Guest:**

**Pastor Matt Harrison**

**Executive Director, LCMS World Relief and Human Care**

**Translator, *Meditations on Divine Mercy***

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**WILKEN:** Greetings, and welcome to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. Thanks for tuning us in.

I trust that all of you had a joyous Christmas, but what if you didn't? What if Christmas was not a time of joy, but a time of sorrow because there was an empty place at the table, someone has died in the last year, or you're ill and it's hard to enjoy the holidays when you have a serious illness or disease. Maybe there's been an accident in the family, a lost job. Why do bad things happen? Theologians and

philosophers alike frame this question as "the problem of evil." That's what they call it. But the basic question is, "Why do bad things happen?" Are they acts of God or, on a more personal level, are they the consequence of missteps and mistakes, for which God is punishing us?

In the course of this conversation, we might have to come around to the real question: not so much the problem of evil, but the problem of God.

Our guest as we talk about “Why do bad things happen?” is Pastor Matt Harrison. He’s Executive Director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care, and he’s translator of the devotional book, *Meditations on Divine Mercy*. Matt, welcome back to *Issues, Etc.*

**HARRISON:** Hi, Todd, it’s always a great pleasure to be with you.

**WILKEN:** Matt, you were recently in Kenya, in Africa. You saw a lot of encouraging things in your time there, but you also saw a lot of very bad things: poverty, disease, starvation, children left orphaned to AIDS, all of these kind of things. Why does God allow these things to happen?

**HARRISON:** Well, that is an amazing and deep mystery. I was floored by Kenya. I have been in Third World circumstances numerous times, but this was the first trip to Kenya, one of the world’s poorest countries. We went to Nairobi, and one of the first things we did was travel to the Nairobi slums. Right there, something like 1.2 or more million people live in the most unbelievable circumstances imaginable. Mud huts on stick frames, with corrugated iron as roofs in many cases. Narrow streets filled with the worst imaginable rubbish. Children, adults, the elderly, people in trouble, the ill. And it really, really throws a Westerner for a loop to face that kind of poverty. It was really interesting, with the entourage of people we brought along, just to watch those who had not experienced the Third World before have to wrestle seriously with who they were, with the comparative amazing and abundant wealth we have in the Western world, and to begin to cope with the theology of this kind of suffering.

**WILKEN:** We have a certain calculus that we employ, as fallen, sinful people, when we see bad things, on a grand scale, like you witnessed, or on an individual scale. And our calculus tends to operate according to the way we think the world works. How

do we reason these things out according to our fallen sensibilities?

**HARRISON:** I think the main thing that gives us trouble, when we view these kind of things, is that we have assumed that people are responsible for the circumstances they are in. This is something that’s very natural to us. It’s part of the American-Protestant work ethic. It’s all around us: pick yourselves up by the bootstraps; take control of your lives; you’re in control of your destiny. And we in America, especially in evangelicalism, but also in other places, clearly have come up with a theology to match it. You do what is required of you, and God will do what you require of Him, and everything will turn out well. I remember here in town, the last time the Rams unfortunately lost the Super Bowl, just before the Super Bowl, one of the players was interviewed about the key to their success. I won’t mention his name, but he said, “If you are faithful and obedient to God, God will be faithful and obedient to you.” I kid you not!

**WILKEN:** So it’s a little bit like that famous song from *The Sound of Music*, where the nun Maria has had all her dreams realized: she’s married Baron von Trapp, the children are all hers now, and she sings, “Somewhere, I must have done something good.”

**HARRISON:** Precisely. And it’s so common in the heart of man. I think of Job and Zophar in chapter 11. He says to Job, “If you devote your heart to God and stretch out your hands to Him, if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil, then all things are going to go well with you, Job.” And that’s the way we like to think. Even when we take a look at the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. Joseph, of course, is sold into slavery by his brothers. We like to think, “Well, Joseph is the one who got himself sold into slavery.” But yet, what does the text say in Genesis

45? You remember the text so well, I'm sure, from Sunday School – after Joseph, who is ruling Egypt, reveals himself to his brothers, the brothers are just absolutely cut to the heart, and he says, "Don't be distressed. Don't be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you, who was acting above it all and beyond it all." He goes on to say, in Genesis 45:7, "God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on Earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance." And what happened out of that, of course, was the people of God were saved, increased, even under slavery, they were brought out and went back to the Holy Land, and from them came the Messiah. God was above and in and through it all.

**WILKEN:** We come up with all sorts of wrong answers to the question that we often ask when we suffer: "Why me?" Or, when others suffer, "Why not me?" Our wrong answers usually have always to do with the fact that we think we're in control of the situation, and you said right here: God is behind it all. You tell a story about the death of a teenager when you were a parish pastor, and a funeral you attended, and a funeral sermon you heard from a female pastor, trying to explain to the people there why this teenager had been taken so early. What was her answer, and what was your reaction?

**HARRISON:** Yes. When we look at the problem of evil, we are facing an absolutely unfathomable and profound mystery that is not easily explained. In fact, it's in many respects unexplainable. A young boy had been involved in a car accident in a rural community. I attended the funeral as pastor of a neighboring church. So many of our children were devastated by this accident. And the woman preached in the sermon, right up front. She said, "I want you to know, God had absolutely nothing to do with this accident." And I thought, "Well, you know,

that's a nice way to, say, get the problem of suffering off God's plate and off our plate, worrying about what God has in mind for us. On the other hand, can I believe in such a God who is not strong enough to prevent these kind of things, or is sort of hands-off in this world? Is that the God I believe in?" I don't think so. St. Paul says in Acts 17, "In Him we live and move and have our being." We know God is all-powerful; there has to be a different explanation.

**WILKEN:** Another wrong answer that we develop, Matt, is "What we call bad really isn't bad; it's actually good. The God I believe in is so good that He wouldn't actually let anything bad happen to me." How do you respond to that?

**HARRISON:** I think that is simplistic as well. There's really an amazing truth in the Bible, especially the New Testament, and I think you find it so clearly in Mark's Gospel, for instance. Mark is the shortest of the Gospels. Read Mark's Gospel and you'll note something: everybody in the Gospel gets Jesus wrong. The only characters in the Gospel who actually get it right about Jesus – "I tell you the truth, you are the Son of God" – are the demons! Those in the spirit world recognize who Jesus is. St. Peter says: Jesus says, "Who do men say I am?" "Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah." "But who do *you* say I am?" "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Mark 8. And Jesus praises him: "Blessed are you, Simon Barjonah, for God has revealed this to you." And then what happens? Jesus starts to predict his suffering and dying, and what does Peter do? Right away, he contradicts Jesus! "I won't have that kind of suffering, Messiah. There's no bad stuff in my Messiah's life. It's victory." Then you go through the rest of the Gospel, and nobody understands who this Jesus is. When He does miracles, they chase him out of town.

Well, who finally gets it right? The only one, besides the demons, who actually knows who Jesus actually is, is a centurion who has crucified Him, and Jesus is hanging on the cross. Chapter 15, the second-to-last chapter [of Mark], and as Jesus is hanging there, dead on the cross, finally the centurion says, “Truly, this man was the Son of God.”

I think there’s an absolutely fabulous and fundamental truth in this for us: we finally see God, we know God, in ways that are quite unexpected. We see Him in suffering. And that changes *everything* about how we look at the world and our lives.

**WILKEN:** When we come back from this break, we’re going to continue our conversation with Pastor Matt Harrison, Executive Director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care. We’re going to be talking more about why bad things happen. The real answer to the problem of evil and of suffering is found, begins, and ends at the cross, so when we come back we’re going to talk about a Theology of the Cross – that is, a way to talk about God and all that He does in terms of the cross, as opposed to our natural theology – we sometimes call that Theology of Glory.

Stay with us. We’ll be right back after this break.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I’m Todd Wilken. Pastor Matt Harrison is our guest as we talk about why bad things happen. He’s Executive Director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care, and he’s also a translator of the devotional book *Meditations on Divine Mercy*.

Matt, before the break, you brought us to the cross as the beginning and the end of the answer to the question of “Why do bad things happen?” There’s a distinction made by theologians between a Theology of the

Cross, a way of thinking and talking about God in terms of the cross, and a Theology of Glory. Make that distinction for us, and explain how that helps us get a handle on the problem of evil.

**HARRISON:** How does God work in this world? That’s the great question. We are naturally prone to think the way it works is this: it’s a mathematical equation. I do good deeds, God rewards me in this life, and then He rewards me with eternal life because I’m a good person. Every religion of the world has some variation on this, and when Christianity goes wrong, it has this variation as well. God works in quite a different way. He calls it the wisdom of the cross – St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 1 and following, talks about the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of the cross. And the wisdom of the cross is foolishness to men. Paul goes on to say that “We preach Christ, the crucified one.” It’s very interesting – the Greek verb that he uses there is a verb that means “Christ is the one who was crucified at one point in the past, and continues always in the future to remain the crucified one.” When we want to see God at work in this world, we want to think, “Oh my goodness, God is gonna give me dreams so I know His will. God is going to tell me how I can follow a certain path, a twelve-step path so I can have health, wealth, and prosperity. If only I open my heart enough, I will then have wealth, and I will have the Holy Spirit.” But the thing we often forget is, and the thing we really mess up, is all those schemes presume “me” as the actor, getting God to do something. And the wisdom of the cross is none of that. The wisdom of the cross is simply: you and I are nothing in Christ’s sight. We are dead in trespasses and sins, and God has to act, and He acts through a cross. He acts in a most surprising way. He acts through a cross to bring about the best for us. And the really interesting thing here, Todd, is that this one act is both supreme evil and supreme good, depending on the way you look at it. So is Christ’s death a

result of sin? Well, absolutely. Is it a result of a pucilianimous and a sinful ruler by the name of Pilate? Absolutely. Is it the result of a first-century Jewish community that attacked Christ and His message and rejected Him as Messiah? Absolutely. Is it the result of disciples who fled and did not stand to confess His name? Absolutely. All those things – it is unmitigated evil. It is killing the Son of God, God in the flesh. And yet, right in the midst of what looks to be the most horrible thing, God is doing exactly what He plans. Think of the women who are standing there, looking at Jesus dying on the cross. It's over. God apparently hates Him and hates us too. Everything we had our hopes on is dying there, is even dead on the cross. And they could not know that God was doing everything, everything good right there on the cross, for the blessing of the entire world, until after the resurrection. And I would hold that that is the lens through which we must view not only the most horrendous suffering in the world, like that in the third world and other suffering we come upon, but also the suffering in our own lives and in our own families. In that sense, we cannot always understand what God is doing – by no means can we understand it. We will understand it one day. Until then, we can know this: God is in charge, God is all-powerful, and God works all things together for good for those who are called according to His purpose – Romans 8, a passage that has long since been my favorite.

**WILKEN:** Some would say, “Well, that’s all fine and good, Pastor Harrison, but Christians need to move beyond the cross, into the victorious life.” And that’s gonna mean a constant kind of betterment of our lives. That means that what was true of suffering in the past, it’ll be gone. The more victorious we are, the more victorious we’ll be over our sins, we’ll struggle less, and we’ll struggle less with these kind of hard questions, like the problem of evil.

**HARRISON:** Well, the problem with that idea is that Jesus doesn’t do it Himself. Jesus lives a perfect life on earth, follows the will of His Father perfectly, and what does it get Him? Crucifixion. And by the way, when St. Peter’s hanging upside-down on a cross, being crucified upside-down because he counted himself not worthy to be crucified in the manner of his Savior – when Peter’s hanging upside down, are you going to tell him, “Peter, you’re not living the victorious life”? And Paul, before the blade swings to chop off his head: “Paul, what, weren’t you living the victorious life?” And have you not read? Can you not look at your New Testament if you have that view? Take a look at all the different places where Paul talks about all the enormous suffering, in trial at sea, in danger at sea, in danger from false brethren. He goes on and on, complaining about all the challenges he faces. Then he says, “I’ve got a thorn in my flesh,” in 2 Corinthians, and he pleads with the Lord three times to take it away – it’s all present tense. And the Lord says, “No. You come to know me most perfectly through suffering. My grace is sufficient for you.” And then Paul goes on to say, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” The victorious life is simply this: it is realizing evermore that I am nothing, and when I am nothing, Christ is my everything. And you can go fool yourself; you can think that you’ve got everything down, and you’re living holy, and that’s why you’re driving a new car, and that’s why God is so-called “blessing” you in so many ways, but finally, you’re going to face death some day. You’re going to face that last moment, barring Christ’s return, where you’re going to be terrified of sin, death, and the devil. And at that point, are you going to say, “I’ve lived a victorious life”? Or are you going to say, “Dearest Jesus, forgive me; I am a beggar and a sinner”? You either say the latter, or you will not spend eternity with Him in heaven.

**WILKEN:** Pastor Harrison, we have only a minute here, and no more, before we go to

this break. At this point, someone's asking, "Well, what place does Satan have in all of this? Where does Satan fit into the problem of evil?" How should we rightly understand this?

**HARRISON:** We see with the case of Job where, actually, the devil comes to God and gets permission to test and try Job. And Job is so wonderful – he says, just after Zophar says, "Straighten up and these bad things wouldn't happen to you," Job says, "Even though the Lord slay me, I will yet hope in Him!" Job 12:12-13 or so. *That* is real faith!

Now, St. Paul makes it clear: he requests the Lord take the thorn from him three times, and the Lord says "No." Now, notice the language there. "I was sent a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan" – passive, "I was sent." Who sent it? God Himself. And the point here is, Satan is like a pit bull on a chain. Satan only gets out as far as the Lord lets him get out, and that is something we must cling to in this life. Evil is controlled by God and used for His purposes, as unfathomable as they may be.

**WILKEN:** Pastor Matt Harrison is our guest. I want to talk a little bit more about that when we come back after this break, and then apply the old distinction of Law and Gospel to the problem of suffering as well. How does it help answer what God is doing and why bad things happen?

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* It strikes me in the midst of this conversation – well, you know the old [quote] is "Denial isn't just a river in Egypt." It's something that all of us engage in – denial. Especially when it comes to the problem of evil. That's what the Theology of Glory is, in essence: a denial of how God is really working in this world. And a denial of what the real Christian life is. You know what the real Christian life is? It's the cross. That's what the real Christian life looks like: it looks a

crucified Savior. That message comes across in conversations like this, when we're talking about the problem of evil, and I hope and pray it comes across in every conversation we have here on *Issues, Etc.*

We're talking about why bad things happen. Pastor Matt Harrison is our guest.

Matt, there's another distinction that is made in Lutheran theology, and other theologies as well: the distinction between Law and Gospel. How does this help the individual Christian, understanding these two words of God, which He speaks in Scripture? How does it help the Christian understand his suffering, and suffering on a greater scale as well?

**HARRISON:** Todd, I think this whole matter of understanding suffering is deeply tied with what is called the doctrine of justification. "How do I know that I'm right with God?" This depends completely on Law and Gospel. And these two realities, these two words of God, are simultaneous realities. Under the Law, I am a sinner. "Even my righteous deeds are as filthy rags," says Isaiah. And St. Paul complains so loudly in Romans 7, and he does not use the past tense. Paul, probably the greatest Christian that ever lived, says, "I do not understand what I do, for what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate, I do! And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree the Law is good – the Law isn't the problem. As it is, it is no longer I myself who does it, but sin living in me." And he goes on to complain that he when he wants to do what is right, he doesn't carry it out. And even when he does what is right, sin is right there crouching at his door. He says, "In my inner being, I delight in the Law of the Lord," but then right away he finds himself sinning. The reality is, sin is so much a part of us, has so much corrupted us; even as Christians, we constantly have the wrong motivations – even when we do the right things. Under the Law, everybody always is

condemned. I love to do a little play on Dr. Seuss, “The Law said what it meant and meant what it said, it damns every one of us 100 percent!” Always! There is never a time the Law will cease to condemn you.

But what’s the purpose of the Law? So you can earn heaven? No, that’d be like trying to climb to heaven on a ladder made of sand. The Law has a purpose, and its purpose is to drive us to Jesus. So at the end of Paul’s great complaint in Romans 7, he says, “O wretched man that I am, who shall save me from this body of death?” And so suffering is the Lord’s alien work, as Martin Luther would say. It is His work, which is used for another more important purpose: to drive us to Jesus. And when we believe in Jesus, even our own sinfulness, even our bad conscience that plagues us – and by the way, a bad conscience is evidence for a Christian that he actually believes in Jesus, because if he didn’t believe in Jesus, he wouldn’t be troubled by a bad conscience. Those things, as we look to Jesus, in and of themselves become crosses which continue to drive us to our merciful Savior, so that we may cry out with blind Bartimaeus, “Lord, Son of David! *Kyrie eleison me*: Lord, have mercy upon me!” That is the epitome of a Christian.

**WILKEN:** There was a book that became very popular some decades back, written by a rabbi – a very famous book: *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* It’s become a cliché for people to even ask this question at times of trouble and at times of catastrophe. Is there a false assumption here?

**HARRISON:** Sure. The premise is that we are all good people; fundamentally, sin is not such a terrible problem, if we just avoid the big sins like committing adultery and not stealing or murdering. Then now we have to explain the problem of why bad things happen to those kind of people. Actually, the real sins are sins against the first table

of the Law. “You shall have no other gods,” which means we shouldn’t fear, love, or trust in anything else. And yet we do. We fear all kinds of things. We fear speaking truth because we’ll be attacked; we love sex or we love or lust after goods or money or a better paycheck, and we’re discontent. Those are the big sins. And we are always guilty of those sins. The premise of the book is wrong, because the reality is, all of us are sinners and none of us deserves anything good from God whatsoever. That is a radical viewpoint of the New Testament, and it really has to be believed. It is not something I can come up with rationally.

**WILKEN:** Maybe part of the mystery of God’s will – and this is where I’d like to talk about two things that Luther says regarding suffering. First of all, he points out in the Catechism that we cannot see how it is that God is constantly acting behind the scenes to thwart the will of the devil, and everything the devil would do – rob us of God’s Kingdom, of our daily bread, of life itself, and especially of faith in Christ. We don’t see that.

**HARRISON:** That’s right. And Todd, I think that often, it’s like that old Charlie Chaplin movie, where he’s walking along reading the newspaper, and he steps into a construction site, onto a beam that is being elevated – have you seen this? He’s being elevated, and he continues to read the paper. The beam goes up at just the right time, so he steps off onto the structure of the building, and then he ends up stepping back off to another beam being lowered down by a crane. He continues on the sidewalk; he’s just been through a hair-raising experience. I’m convinced our lives are just like that. And then, once in a while, God will allow us to stub a toe or something, and we will howl, scream to high heaven, after we’ve just been through the previous experience of being safe from who knows what, we’ll scream, “Where were you, God?!”

I broke my fingernail!" I'm convinced life is just like that.

**WILKEN:** Luther also talks in terms of John 5, I think it is, where Jesus speaks the famous words, "I am the vine, you are the branches; whatever vine in me bears good fruit. The Father prunes so that it might bear more fruit." Recount for us how it is Luther deals with that passage, in terms of human suffering.

**HARRISON:** That is one of my favorite sections of Luther. Luther said, "If I want to be a Christian, I must also wear the court uniform. Dear Christians must suffer, and that is the court uniform of being a Christian." Now, he says in this vine and branches text, "I am the vine, you are the branches" – [Luther] personifies the vine. So the vinedresser comes along one day and starts pruning the vine, and the vine screams, "What are you doing? You're chopping me to pieces, you're hacking me to nothing, you're gonna kill me!" And the vinedresser says, "Oh no, I'm just trimming away the unfruitful branches so you'll be even more fruitful." And then next the vinedresser comes along and starts prodding the roots of the plant, and the plant screams again, "What are you doing, you fool? You'll chop me off at the roots right there! I'll be dead for good! No fruit whatsoever!" The vinedresser says, "No, I'm not chopping anything. I'm just loosening the soil around you so you will be able to grow and produce a wonderful harvest." And then finally, the vinedresser comes along with a big wheelbarrow of manure, and sure enough, throws the manure right up on the root area of the vine, and the vine screams, "What are you doing?! You're going to drown me in that muck!" And the vinedresser says, "Oh no, I'm just fertilizing you. It's unpleasant now, but I'm fertilizing you so that you'll produce the best harvest ever."

Luther says that's what it is in the Christian life. The Lord does a lot of fertilizing, and Lord knows we go through all kinds of muck in this life. But we know in Christ that suffering is purposeful, just like the cross, and we share in the sufferings of Jesus, Paul says. We fulfill the sufferings of Christ. Isn't that an amazing thought? And He brings it about, not for our destruction, but to drive us to cling to Him. I wouldn't pray much if I didn't have to suffer a bit in this world.

**WILKEN:** Pastor Matt Harrison is our guest here, answering the question "Why do bad things happen?" He's Executive Director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care.

Luther says there are three things that make a theologian: meditation, prayer, and suffering. *Meditatio, oratio, and tentatio.* Suffering: it is the crucible in which we are purified. Not purified so much as we tend to think of purity in terms of morals; no. God is purifying faith in Christ by suffering, and He is connecting us to the sufferings of Christ, and then we begin to see everything, all the bad things that happen in our lives, through the lens of the cross. If we have been united with Him in a death like His, beyond this suffering, there must be a hope, for then we will be united with Him in a resurrection like His.

When we come back, we're going to talk about the question "Why?"

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Pastor Matt Harrison is our guest. For the next few minutes, we'll conclude our conversation answering the question, "Why do bad things happen?"

Matt, can we ever answer the question "Why," the big "Why" question, with any particulars in this life, before the resurrection?



**HARRISON:** That is a huge question; I'm asking you why you asked me that question. [chuckles] Actually, there are obvious answers to obvious things. If I live in a fast and loose way, and drive 100 miles an hour without my seatbelt on, in a rickety car, and go off the road, there's an obvious cause for that kind of activity on a limited basis.

**WILKEN:** Consequences for our actions.

**HARRISON:** Absolutely. And nothing I have said today wishes to circumvent that. But we are not prophets. And the Lord does not, contrary to what many believe, the Lord does not appear to us in dreams, and the Lord does not appear to us through people who rant and rave and say, "The Lord told me this or that." I look at St. Paul: St. Paul was a prophet of God. He says, "I have been given certain surpassing revelations. But in order to keep me humble, I was given a thorn in my flesh." Now, Paul knows the general cause of the challenges he faced were to keep him humble. And I would say we are in exactly the same circumstance, though we do not receive revelations like Paul did. We have the Bible. We are put through afflictions by God to drive us to Jesus, and therefore I can say exactly – if I'm going through troubles in my life, I'll say, "Oh Lord, I plead with you three times, take it away from me!" But God responds, through this very word in 2 Corinthians 12, not only to Paul, but to us, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness, just like Jesus on the cross, and therefore, I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses." You notice where Law is at work in the wrong way, we're boasting about how holy we are – "Oh, everything will go fine in your life if you get holy like me. Follow these ten steps and you'll make a million like I have!" That's not the Bible. "I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for

when I am weak, then I am strong because I'm holding to Jesus. Only Jesus. Nothing but Jesus. Always Jesus. And nothing in me." And that is Christianity in its best form.

**WILKEN:** I'd like to talk, for just a few minutes, about not my suffering, but about the suffering of my neighbor. Is my neighbor's suffering my opportunity to act in love through my vocation – that place where God has put me in life?

**HARRISON:** Oh, absolutely. That is your vocation, your call to serve Jesus. You think of Jesus in the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, saying to the righteous, "I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was in prison and you visited me," etc., and the righteous say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or in prison?" And Jesus says, "Truly I say to you, whatsoever you have done to the least of these my brethren, you have done it also unto me." The service of God does not happen primarily on Sunday morning at church. That's where God serves you with His Word of forgiveness, and His grace of Word and in Sacrament, the Lord's Supper. And Luther will say, "There, in the Lord's Supper, Christ gives Himself all for you, that you may now give yourself all for your neighbor." And so my neighbor's need is my vocation to service. And this is so beautiful, because a lot of times when we suffer things, we get into kind of a pity party and think, "Oh, my, I can't see beyond my navel; why is God doing this to me?" But then later, we find our neighbor who is suffering those same difficulties we once went through. And now, we're worth something. We're usable by God because we've been humbled, and we've been taught something by suffering, and we can love our neighbor in a way that was totally impossible previous to it. I've seen this in my own life many, many times.

**WILKEN:** There's a person listening to us just coming out of the holiday, the

Christmas season, and for them, all of the joy of this time rings hollow. They say, “I don’t see it. I don’t see Jesus in my life. My life is, at this point, darkness, loneliness, sorrow, loss.” What do you say to them?

**HARRISON:** I say, good. Because you are learning that you are nothing in and of yourselves, and you need Jesus, and you are being driven to Jesus. I say to you, “Go to church.” It’s not about what you give; it’s about what you receive from Jesus. You say, “No, but they’re all hypocrites at church!” Well, of course they are, and there’s room for one more: you. Church is not a place where we say, “Oh, come, get holy like us. Come, quit breaking the Law and be holy like us so we’re pleasing to Jesus.” No, church is a place where we say, “Come, quit acting like you don’t need Jesus, and join us on our knees.” Find a church that confesses Christ. Find a church where you have to confess your sins in the liturgy. Find a church where the pastor says, “In Christ’s stead I forgive you your sins, and no matter how you feel, that holds good.” And Christ’s cross holds good for you, no matter how you feel. And with time, the Lord will let you have glimpses of joy now and again in your life. But the cross holds good for you no matter what, especially when you don’t feel anything.

**WILKEN:** Pastor Matt Harrison, thank you very much for being our guest on *Issues, Etc.*

Pastor Matt Harrison is Executive Director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care. He also translated the devotional book, *Meditations on Divine Mercy*.

Paul was acquainted with suffering, and I think in time it came as no surprise to him that he would suffer. The deeper he grew to know his Savior Jesus Christ, the more it all made sense. Now, he didn’t know all the particular answers to the question “why I am suffering.” But he did know the one who suffered for him. When Paul was first called there on the road to Damascus, Jesus our Lord says of him to Ananias, the man who would later baptize him, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” A man who had caused suffering for Christ’s name, the persecutor of the Church, is suddenly put in the position of a sufferer. Why is this? Because that’s the position Christ put Himself in for you, and for me, and for Paul, and for Ananias, and for those Christians who have suffered for His name throughout the centuries. Christ put Himself in that position. The one who suffers and dies for sinners like us – it makes our suffering all the better.

Thanks to listening to *Issues, Etc.* Have a great new year.

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