

When Tragedy Strikes



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On the warm sunny morning of September 11, 2001, people went about their business as usual, thousands of them working at the World Trade Center in New York City. No one could have imagined as they sipped their morning coffee, read the morning paper, attended a business meeting, or sat at their computer that they were about to become a victim of one of the greatest tragedies in recent times. They innocently went about their business while two commercial airplanes were hijacked and commandeered to crash into the buildings, leaving thousands of them scrambling to save their lives. Unfortunately, thousands of them died in the flames and rubble.

Why did God let this happen? And if these people had to die, why did it happen this way? There are peaceful, painless ways to die. Why would God take these lives so violently? Or did God have anything to do with it at all?

This question has come up repeatedly throughout the years. All of us could cite a variety of examples leaving us with the question of why God would allow such tragedy to happen or whether He is involved at all.

The question has not become easier with the passage of time. It is troubling, but not because it is complicated or difficult. It is troubling because the truth of the matter is not what we expected or hoped for. The answer and its implications might force us to change the way we think of God.

The major circumstances concerning the truth of tragedy are usually surrounded by a series of conditions that sometimes cause us to become victims of those circumstances. However, all of us should realize that we could be potential victims of self-inflicted tragedy due to our own inability to take control of circumstances and habits in our life as well. Here then, are seven points to consider the age-old question of why death and suffering and how to help you reduce the affects of tragedy.

Death is certain

When you think about it, anyone can see that God never intended man to be permanent. "It is appointed unto men once to die," said Paul, "and after that the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). So it would seem that man cannot get from here to there without dying in the process.

Oh, God intends that man *become* permanent. But what we are at the moment is flesh, and flesh was never intended to last. The New Testament writers had a useful metaphor. They compared the human to a tent, or tabernacle. Peter, in his second epistle, put it this way: "Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle [tent], to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ has showed me" (2 Peter 1:13-14).

The word "tabernacle" in both Old and New Testaments simply means a temporary dwelling place—usually a tent. It could be a hut or brush arbor set up for shelter from the elements and intended only for a short stay. Israel of old was commanded to keep the Feast of Tabernacles, living in "booths" for seven days, to remind them that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For them, it was a national day of remembrance of the forty years wandering in the wilderness.

The Feast of Tabernacles is more than that. Gentiles must also keep the feast (Zechariah 14:16-19), and for them it is a reminder that human life is temporary. Peter used the word this way, speaking of "putting off" his "tabernacle" like one might take off a garment or fold up a tent and put it away. The human body, then, in a manner of speaking, is a tabernacle—a temporary hut in which we live for a short time.

Some years ago, a great Christian lady died at age 74—apparently of cancer. During her protracted illness, the church prayed and fasted for her as it had for no one else in living memory. After she had died, it left another woman terribly shaken. She simply could not understand how God would let such a person die. After all, we had fasted, we had prayed, we had faith. "How could God let her die?" was the woman's insistent question.

This seems a curious question. The woman was 74 years old. If she had wanted to ask why God let her suffer, that would have been something to think about. But to ask why God let her die? Peter died. Paul died. All the apostles died. Some died of persecution, and some simply got old and died. After all, "it is appointed unto men once to die."

The apostle Paul also spoke of the body as a tent or tabernacle. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he said, "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." We are pilgrims. We live in a temporary shelter, and we live "on the road." If our temporary shelter—our

body—were dissolved, cremated, eaten by wild animals, or otherwise destroyed, that is not the end of us. We have a more permanent abode toward which we journey.

"Living this way," said Paul, "we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened."

The body ages and wears out. This should hardly be surprising, because the flesh was not made to last. It was made to die. The body is like a tent. The fabric wears thin, the grommets pull out, stakes get broken or lost, mice eat holes in it, and it finally becomes useless. An old and useless tent becomes a burden, because you still have it in the garage and in the way. In the same way, our physical bodies can become a burden—a burden that we sometimes wish we could lay down.

Paul continued to explain, "Not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life." It is not that we don't want to exist. We want to exist, but we want to exist as a new creature, a new being, living in a new house, in a permanent dwelling with God.

"Now He that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God," Paul said, "who also hath given us the earnest of the Spirit. Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord" (verses 5-6). Flesh and blood cannot come into God's presence; it's absolutely impossible because flesh and blood would be destroyed by the power of God's presence. "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord" (verses 7-8). Of all the states in which a man might find himself, said Paul, I would rather be freed of this tabernacle and I would rather have my house, my *permanent* house, with God.

"Wherefore we labour," he went on, "that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (verses 9-10).

Death is certain. We all know that, and we usually accept it. We just want to put it off as long as we can.

Life is short

Have you ever heard the expression, "Life's too short for that?" Life is too short! Too short to waste time the way so many of us do. "Man that is born of woman," said Job, "is few of days and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not."

When you are in your twenties, it seems like being in your fifties is so far

off. But it's only thirty years. However, when you are in your sixties, it sounds a little scary. It should be no surprise that God does not look at time the way we do. When it comes to God, time has no meaning. As the Psalmist said, "LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God" (Psalm 90:1; tradition calls this a prayer of Moses).

Moses continued: "Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, return, ye children of man. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past and as a watch in the night" (verses 3-4). A watch in the night is four hours. A four-hour watch to a military man may seem like a long time. But for God, a thousand years is like a watch in the night.

"Thou carriest them away as with a flood," continued the Psalmist. "They are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth." In the cosmic scheme of things, that seems to be all we are—a one-day piece of grass. We come up in the morning; we grow and flourish throughout the day. Toward evening, the mower comes along and cuts us off at the roots and leaves us to dry out overnight. Compared to the age of the universe, the lifespan of man does not amount to much. Compared to the age of God, it amounts to even less.

"For we are consumed by thine anger," said Moses, "and by thy wrath we are troubled. Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance. For all our days are passed away in thy wrath; we spend our years like a tale that is told. The days of our years are threescore and ten." We don't seem to have made much progress. The average lifespan in the days when this was written lay between seventy and eighty. With all our medicines, hospitals, and procedures, our lifespan is in the low seventies for men and high seventies for women.

"If by reason of strength," the Psalm continues, "our years be fourscore, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." In other words, it doesn't really get much better. The healthiest and most long-lived among us have labor and sorrow to look forward to. When it is all over, our life is blown away like a little bit of dust accumulated on the shelf. One puff, and it is gone.

The sum of it all is verse 12: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." We have no guarantee of how long God is going to let us live on this earth. You can count your days. You may live seventy years, seven years, or seven days. You have no guarantee. Even the most righteous has no guarantee. Perhaps the greatest prophet of all was Elijah. But a man who performed more miracles than Elijah, a man who had

a double portion of Elijah's spirit, finally fell sick of the sickness whereof he finally died (2 Kings 13:14).

Moses closed out his prayer with a curious statement: "O satisfy us early with thy mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein you have afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil." It is not the natural state of man to be glad in the days of affliction. God will have to do something to help us make sense of it all. Moses plea was, "Let thy work appear unto thy servants" (verse 16). Show us what you are doing, so we can make sense of it all.

What this means is that all your sacrifice, all your pain, all your loss is somehow tied up in the work that God is doing here. Accidents are not God's work. Death is not God's work. But God's work is very much involved. None of the sufferings of this life are without meaning.

Accidents happen

There are two important passages of Scripture that we must keep in mind if we are going to understand all this. The first is from King Solomon:

"I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all" (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

This is not to say that wisdom does not load the scales in favor of the wise. And it is said that a man of understanding is more likely to find riches than a fool. And it surely does not mean that the faster runner is not most likely to win the race. What it does mean is that none of these men are exempt from the laws of time and chance.

But surely it is better to be righteous than to be a sinner. Doesn't the Bible say that God blesses the righteous? It does, but consider the second passage:

"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:44-45).

We live in the world, and we are subject to the elements of chance like everyone else. Nothing is more capricious than the weather, and we are plainly told that we cannot expect God to arrange that the rain runs right down our fence line. The dice may be loaded in favor of the wise, the swift, the understanding, and the righteous, *but the dice must still be thrown*.

Obedience to God is merely what is expected of us. The blessing of God does not make us immune to stupidity. You cannot take God's blessing, put it in an egregiously bad investment, and expect it to prosper. It is possible for

a righteous man to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. If you are in an elevator when an earthquake strikes, you may well get hurt—even if you are as righteous as Job.

There was in Jesus' day a prevailing notion that a man's guilt was directly proportional to the affliction he received. A man who was healthy and wealthy was assumed to be a righteous man. A man who was sick and poor must have been a terrible sinner for all this to come upon him.

It was just this notion that Jesus addressed in response to those who mentioned two awful calamities that had recently befallen a few poor souls in their city. "Have you heard," they wanted to know, "of the Galileans who were killed by Pilate *while they were making sacrifice to God?*" Jesus, in His reply, spoke directly to the issue at hand:

"Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:2ff).

It was beyond comprehension to Jesus' listeners that people who were doing good—sacrificing—should suffer evil. It was as though being religious or engaging in religious acts was some sort of talisman to ward off evil.

But it was not so. The death of those worshippers was as random an event as the collapse of a tower. Evil happens. Evil is perpetrated. When you are a victim of a tragedy, be it a random event or perpetrated evil, it does not mean that you are a worse sinner than those not so afflicted.

This is not to say that the victims of tragedy are not sinners. But Jesus made it very clear that there was no connection between the fact that they were sinners and the tragedy. We are all sinners, and unless we repent we are all going to die. We may not die in a building collapse, but something will eventually get us.

For some reason, we seem disinclined to believe in accidents. Whatever happens, we think, happens for a reason. Perhaps. If a wheel comes off your car, and you crash head on into a bridge abutment, there might have been a reason for it. You may have failed to have the wheel bearings checked before you started on a trip. When they did your brake job down at the shop, they forgot to repack your bearings.

But don't assume that God has some great cosmic reason why the crash took place. The only reason behind it may be human carelessness. The bearing might have broken on a straight, lonely road at twenty miles per hour. The fact that it broke right opposite a bridge abutment at sixty-five miles per hour is pure time and chance.

The truth is that God does not cause accidents. He is not in the business of breaking bodies and snuffing out the lives of people who offend Him.

"Well, but He *allowed* it didn't He?" someone is sure to ask. Yes, but God does not micromanage the way you drive your car or the way you maintain your car. It can be said that God allows everything He doesn't disallow. But that does not mean He had a hand in it at all—or that He had a reason for that accident to take place at that time. Accidents happen and people get hurt when God has nothing whatever to do with it.

God put man at risk

God has put us all at risk in the world. This should not come as a surprise to anyone. We have lived with it all our lives. Suppose you are preparing to leave on a trip. You load all your luggage into the car, and then you pause to pray before you go. "God please keep us safe from harm." Do you believe that praying relieves you of the responsibility of checking your tires before you leave? Common sense tells us that we need to check the belts and hoses on the engine and look at our tires and check the inflation all around.

Then, when we get on the road, common sense tells us that we should drive the speed limit, look both ways at intersections, stop at stop signs, and obey caution signs. I know of no one who believes that prayer means you can drive on threadbare tires without risking an accident. We pray and then do the best we can for ourselves. We are at risk in the world, *even when we have prayed.*

We are children of God. If we are children, Paul said, then we are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:16). It is a marvelous thing to know. But doesn't that mean that God wants to take care of us, to protect us? Wouldn't He do everything necessary to protect us from our own foolishness?

I believe He does. But how far can you go in protecting your own children from their foolishness? You do what you can, but you can't keep them locked up in a padded room—not if they are to have a life. They have to live. They have to learn how to climb trees. Sooner or later, they have to cross a road, and there will be cars on the road.

You try to teach your children about these things. You tell them that the road is dangerous, that you can get hurt climbing trees. You may teach them safety procedures, to look both ways before crossing a street, or to hold on with both hands while climbing.

Even so, accidents happen. People get hurt. You will do your best to teach your children about those things and you will try to make them behave responsibly. But somewhere, sometime, somehow you have to let them out in the yard and across the street and off to school. Don't you?

When Paul said that we are *heirs* with Christ, he added a whole new

dimension to the question. If being an heir means an inheritance, then there is something coming our way. If we are to inherit something, then that implies responsibility.

It is like a man who grows up in his father's business with the full expectation that he will someday inherit it. This means his father must teach him the business. He has much to learn. He will have some time to grow into it, developing responsibility, character, and knowledge. There is no way to effectively run his father's business without his father's character. Knowledge is not enough. That is why Paul goes on to say that we are joint-heirs with Christ, "if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (verse 17).

It is in the suffering that the character is built. There is a bond that is formed in the sharing of suffering—a bond that can last a lifetime. This is displayed often in the relationship of veterans who fought in wars, people who have suffered through natural calamities, or ministers who have anointed or buried the sick and dying.

This is not such a small truth. We are allowed to suffer in this world because of the inheritance that we have with Christ. We have been put at risk in this world because God wants something great from us in the end. Without suffering, we will never have the character to do what needs to be done. Sometimes we suffer alone, sometimes we suffer with others, and sometimes we suffer for others.

Paul had this to say about suffering: "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope" (Romans 8:18).

Now that is the truth. We are the creatures that were made subject to "vanity" (read that "futility"). And nobody asked us if we were willing. God did that on His own without consulting us, but He did it in hope. He did it because He wanted a certain result.

What Paul is saying is that the creature—the creation—was deliberately put at risk. We creatures are thrown out into the world and placed at risk. For God to subject us to this, He must have high hopes for what we are to become—for what we are to do. Small wonder that people don't understand why God allows us to suffer in the world. They haven't a clue what He is doing here and what He intends to do in time to come.

It would seem that God has much more in mind for man than merely going to heaven, dining on milk and honey, and looking up into the Master's face for all eternity. If that were all there were to it, He could take us now. Or if we have to stay here, He could protect us from pain, suffering, and loss.

But we are to be *heirs* of God. With that inheritance comes responsibility.

We can only understand the hurt and suffering of this world when we understand what God has in store for us. The greater the tragedy, the greater the trial, the greater the pain, the more serious the suffering—the greater is the responsibility that is ahead of us.

Paul went on to explain, "Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (verse 21). "Bondage of corruption" describes it well enough, for if it isn't one thing it's another. We are all subject to this bondage. Corruption is all around us. We may live our lives clean and upright. We may do our best for our spouses and families. And we still could find our doctor telling us we have AIDS. We are a part of the creation, and we are "subject to the bondage of corruption."

Is there, then, any point in praying? Oh yes. God *does* hear prayer, and He *does* protect and bless. But it should be plain that prayer does not totally exempt us from the laws of time and chance. What it does mean is that none of our sufferings are pointless; they are all known to God. They all have meaning. They are part of a plan for our lives and our eternal lives.

God has placed us at risk in the world, but He has done so with hope of great things for us.

Flesh is cheap; character is dear

Flesh is cheap. People come, people go. People are being born on this earth by the millions, and by the millions they are dying. Some are dying before they are born. Some thirty million have been aborted since Roe V. Wade became the law of the land. Many are dying as newborns. Some are dying as children. Some are starving to death. In this world, flesh is cheap.

It may pain us to know it, but even God considers flesh to be cheap. In the long view, flesh is just not very important. God is willing for your flesh to decay, deteriorate and die. He is willing for you to suffer in the flesh—to go through almost anything—in order to create something greater out of you. In order to make you more than you are, in order to lift you to a level of greatness you cannot even imagine, God is willing to sacrifice your flesh. Flesh is cheap. Character is dear.

If this were not true, there would be no way to understand what God did to Job. We know He didn't do it Himself, but He allowed Satan to do it, and the outcome is the same. The story is a long one, but there are just a few points in it that deserve attention here.

Satan had found an occasion to appear before God, and God inquired whether the Devil had, in his travels, taken note of a very special man. "Hast thou considered my servant Job," He asked, "that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth

evil?" (Job 1:8). Job was about to suffer tragedy, *but it was not because he was a bad man*. As men go, he was exceptional. He is the only man God held up as "perfect and upright."

But the Devil was not impressed. "Well," he replied, "does Job serve you for nothing? You have put a hedge around him, his house, and everything he has. You've made him a wealthy man. Take all that away, and he will curse you to your face" (verses 9–11).

So the gauntlet was cast on the very question that troubles us. Will a man serve God for nothing, or does he have to get paid? We think God should not allow His servants to suffer. He should protect us and our children from harm and loss. We should be relieved of all pain as soon as we ask.

God accepted the challenge (without consulting Job). He put all Job's possessions at risk, but he put limits on what the adversary could do. He could take all that he had, but he could not touch Job's body. Shortly after, all of Job's flocks were destroyed or stolen (his entire livelihood wiped out), virtually all of his servants were killed, and his seven sons and three daughters were dead. A lot of flesh died here. Was it just to prove a point?

But Job was steadfast. He said, "The LORD has given, and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD." So when the Devil came back to appear before God again, "The LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? And still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movest me against him, *to destroy him without cause*" (Job 2:3).

Job had done nothing to bring this on. *There was no cause*. He was a good man, and had God's testimony to that fact. He did not deserve any of the evil that came upon him.

So the Devil raised the ante. "Skin for skin," he said, "yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life. But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face."

God's reply set Job up for some serious suffering. He said, "Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life."

So Satan went immediately and "smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown." Job took a broken piece of pottery to scrape himself and sat down in the ashes. His wife did not take all this very well. "Are you still maintaining your own integrity?" she asked, "Go on, curse God and die. Get it over with."

"You speak as one of the foolish women," Job answered. "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" The author of this piece concluded that in all this, Job did not "sin with his lips." What he said in his heart may have been a different matter.

It seems not to have bothered God in the least to take everything Job had and then to see him covered with boils and in pain. If there is one thing that comes clear in the book of Job, it is that God could care less about physical things—possessions, flesh, comfort, and health. If you want to know what He really cared about, read the concluding chapter of the book of Job. Job, who had been rather self-satisfied if not self-righteous, got a real lesson in character. Only after the lesson was learned did God restore him to what he had before.

Flesh is cheap and character is dear. Job learned his great lessons the hard way.

Death is not the end

We know that death is not the end. We know that there is a resurrection of the dead ahead. But think of the way people are at funerals. Here is a preacher assuring us that the dear departed is in the presence of God and all the holy angels. He is beyond pain, beyond suffering. He is present in glory, and happy beyond our wildest dreams.

Then why is everyone weeping and carrying on so? They are crying because they will miss him, but where is the happiness for where he is and what he is doing. To tell the truth, the reaction we usually see at funerals would be more appropriate if the dear departed had gone to hell.

At the funeral of a teen-age boy who had killed himself, the pastor allowed that the lad was in heaven now, driving a fast car with the stereo blasting. It was apparent that his schoolmates, clinging to one another in tears, did not believe a word of it. They knew he was dead, and dead is not good.

Death is foreign country to the young. They do not even fear death like their elders, because you have to think about something to really fear it. When death does intrude, it is a terrible shock. A line from a Clint Eastwood movie considers the implications of death: "It's a terrible thing to kill a man. You take away everything he has and everything he is going to have."

Well, not really. There are two Old Testament passages that should make us think. The first is one short sentence from Psalm 116:15: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints." Now this runs counter to anything we know or feel. Death is an enemy, an evil to be avoided. And yet God considers the death of one of His children a precious thing. How can this be?

Only part of the answer is found in the prophet Isaiah: "The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart: and merciful men are taken away, none considering that the righteous is taken away from the evil to come" (Isaiah 57:1). Isaiah, being a prophet, knew something that most of his contemporaries did not know. There was going to be hell to pay for the sins of Israel. The city would be besieged. There would be widespread starvation, leading ultimately to cannibalism. What better than to sleep quietly through such terrible times? That is, if death is not the end.

It seems hard for man to keep his faith in the resurrection. People had begun to doubt it while there were still witnesses of Christ's resurrection alive and testifying. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, there are echoes of the problem. "Now if Christ be preached that He rose from the dead." Paul wondered, "How say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching pointless, and your faith is also pointless" (1 Corinthians 15:12-14).

It is no good saying that Christianity is a good religion, that Jesus was a great teacher, that the apostles were all fine men and the disciples nice people—they just got carried away with this resurrection business. No, if there is no resurrection, then Jesus is a fraud, the apostles are a pack of unprincipled liars, and the disciples a group of gullible idiots. There is no middle ground on this issue.

Paul said it: "Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ: whom He raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they that have fallen asleep in Christ are perished" (verses 15-18).

Paul saw no middle ground either. For Paul, Christianity was not just a good way to live your life. He said, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (verse 19).

When Paul wrote this letter, going through the waters of baptism could not only change your life, it could end it. It almost certainly meant your life was about to become more complicated and difficult. The Christian of the first century lived a hard life. He was destined to suffer, to do without, to lose property, to be betrayed by loved ones. There was a reasonably good chance he would die for his faith. In that day, there wasn't much in this life for a Christian.

When Paul said, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable," he acknowledges the truth that it was never God's intent that Christians have an easier time of it than the rest of the world. That was not the point of Christ's sacrifice. Christians were called to become like God, to share His character, and ultimately His life; otherwise, none of that means anything if death is the end.

It is the response that counts

In the eyes of God, *what really counts is not the tragedy but our response to the tragedy*. Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes after he had time to take a long, hard look at life. He had come to understand all I have told you in this article, and more. He wrote, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose

under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2).

There is a time to die, and it can come anytime, at any age. We rarely have much to say about it. Time and chance is the determining factor more often than not, though God occasionally decides that it is time for a person to go.

Solomon continued: "[There is] a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." It might be easy for Christians during a joyful moment to forget that there is a time to weep, and a time to mourn—and that the time to weep is when those we love are weeping.

As long as we are in this life, every moment of joy, every celebration, is hostage to tragedy. The more of us there are together, be we family or church, the more likely there are to be small, private, personal tragedies lurking in the wings. At every festival, every church service, every occasion for eating, drinking, and making merry, there are those who have suffered, who are often alone, or who have come to the celebration in pain. They have come for one reason only; they want to be where love is. They do not want to be alone when things are going bad.

As long as we are tabernacling in the flesh, camping out as it were, time and chance will always be with us. A tent pole breaks; something catches fire; we burn up our stove; we lose our food—something is always going wrong. There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, and those times are often not very far apart.

One of the greatest lessons in all this is given by Solomon: "Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man would find nothing after him" (Ecclesiastes 7:13-14).

Solomon seems to be saying that God has set this all up so that we cannot win. When the time comes to go, He seems intent that we should leave nothing behind. We would love to solve all problems, straighten all the crooked roads. But are we able to straighten out what God has made crooked? Or are we destined to suffer adversity for no better reason than that is the way God has said it would be?

You have been made subject to risk, subject to the corruption of the world. You have to live in it. You will be hurt by it so you can learn from it. "All things have I seen in the days of my vanity," said Solomon; "there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness." It is true. It does not mean that God is not there. It means that God has decreed that it will be so.

However, there is another side. Solomon continues: "Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God."

So there is justice after all. But don't look for justice in the short run. "There is a vanity which is done upon the earth," said Solomon, "that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous; I said that this also is vanity." You are not the first person to cry out to God about the unfairness of life. Solomon was there before you.

The search for justice in this life will only lead to frustration. This is not God's world—God's kingdom. That is yet to come. God has made us subject to risk in the world for His own reasons and His own purposes, and He can make it stick. He is sovereign. He can do whatever He wants to do with you. We have no choice.

When Jesus said, "Be ye perfect," He meant what He said. I can't say it better than C.S. Lewis: "Those who put themselves in His hands will become perfect, as He is perfect—perfect in love, joy, wisdom, beauty, and immortality. Then change will not be completed in this life, for death is an important part of the treatment" (*Mere Christianity*, p. 175).

Death is a part of the process of making us into what God wants us to be. So is suffering. So is loss. God would give up His only Son. In making Abraham more like God, He called on him to do the same.

"I have thought my way through all this," said Solomon, "so I could say this: that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are all in the hand of God" (Ecclesiastes 9:1). And so they are. It is enough.

Solomon's conclusion? Read it as poetry:

*Go thy way,
Eat thy bread with joy, and
Drink thy wine with a merry heart;
For God now accepteth thy works.
Let thy garments be always white; and
Let thy head lack no ointment.
Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest
All the days of the life of thy vanity,
Which He hath given thee under the sun,
All the days of thy vanity:
For that is your portion in this life,
And in thy labour*

*Which thou takest under the sun.
Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do,
Do it with thy might,
For there is no work, nor device,
Nor knowledge, nor wisdom,
In the grave, whither thou goest.*

*I returned, and saw under the sun,
That the race is not to the swift,
Nor the battle to the strong,
Neither yet bread to the wise,
Nor yet riches to men of understanding,
Nor yet favour to men of skill; but
Time and chance happeneth to them all.*

This life will be filled with frustration and grief. Don't bother being tentative. Whatever it is you are doing, go for it. You have nothing to lose.

The world described in this booklet is not the world most of us want. We would rather believe in what some call the "Just World Hypothesis." In a just world, things even out. In a just world, good people win. Bad events are balanced with good. Every loss is offset by a gain. We wish. But that world is not this world.

Have you ever looked around, when attending a funeral, and see a mixture of grieving and joyful faces? The smiling faces may seem out of place, but when you realize people are happy to see those they haven't seen for a long time, you realize a smile or laughter is not out of place at a funeral. It is love that laughs—out of sheer joy.

Joy, even in grief, is never out of place. Nor is joy in tribulation, joy in pain, or joy in suffering. It is all right to love one another and to laugh—even in tragedy. It is all right to eat your food and drink your wine and to lift a toast to the people whose memory you will always cherish.

As you live your life and time goes on, eventually you may face a tragedy; and inevitably you will face death. But remember the revealed wisdom of our Creator God in the passages of Scripture you have just read. And remember 1 Corinthians 1:3–4, which states God is "the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

About the Church of God International

This literature is published by the Church of God International, based in Tyler, Texas. Incorporated in 1978, the CGI has ministers and congregations scattered throughout the United States and Canada. We also have churches in Jamaica, the Philippines, and Australia.

The CGI's mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world (Matthew 28:19). We are blessed with four basic tools to accomplish this:

- 1. Personal and local church evangelism.*
- 2. Television and radio broadcasting.*
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