

Making Sense of Tragedy

Luke 13:1-5

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On Oct 1, 1997, Justin Safely was a seventh grader at Pearl, Mississippi. He was waiting for his first class to start, but his choir teacher never arrived. The class of about 60 students were having a good time goofing off.

Then word came that there had been a shooting at the high school. This was before cell phones were common, so there was no way the students could call and confirm the rumor.

Soon they heard police cars headed in the direction of the high school. Then more and more reports started to flood in. Then they heard some students were dead. Next, they heard a teacher had been shot.

Eventually Justin heard that “Jerry Safley,” his brother was among those that had been shot. Not only had his brother been shot, he heard that his girlfriend had been shot, too. Then he heard that Jerry was dead.

Justin was also worried for about his mother because she was a teacher at the high school and she was working that morning.

When the bell rung for students to change to second period, Justin saw people in the hallway that had not yet heard the news. Finally, they announced over the intercom that there had been a shooting at the high school.

After that, parents began checking their children out of school. All anyone could think about was whether their older brother or sister or someone close to them were among the dead or wounded.

Justin cannot recall whether his father or youth pastor checked him out of school and neither can his father. Parts of the day are a blur.

He does remember going to the hospital in Jackson and feeling the relief of seeing his brother in a wheelchair with non-life-threatening injuries.

His mother was okay physically, but to this day still suffers with survivor’s guilt from that dreaded morning 20 years ago. The entire family has some PTSD from this event and every time there is a mass shooting in this country, it sets off some of those emotions.

On that day in Pearl Mississippi twenty years ago, 2 teenage girls died, 7 other students were shot. The gunman also murdered his mother that morning before heading to school.

Justin says, “It left our little community in shock. We were left wondering, ‘Why God? Why us?’ To this day there is no good answer.”

Tragedies caused by man or nature leave us perplexed as to why people suffer and claim the lives of good people.

Jesus was posed with such a question once.

Today, the gospel of Luke addresses situations where innocent people are caught in the crosshairs of suffering and death.

Luke 13:1-5

1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (NIV)

According to the National Severe Storms Laboratory, lightning strikes the earth as much as eight million times per day. That’s 100 times per second. As you might guess, if a human gets in the way of one of these lightning strikes, it can be fatal. That happens about 24,000 times a year worldwide.

If you believe in God, you believe that God created the world and all that is within it, including the weather. But does God hurl down lightning bolts, indiscriminately killing some people while allowing others to live?

Lightning kill all kinds of people, in all countries, of all religions, of all economic brackets, who hold different philosophies, some of whom we might call good and some of whom we might call evil. So it seems that lightning doesn’t discriminate.

Sure, there are people who have survived lightning storms who believed they might have died if it were not for a benevolent God looking over them.

Martin Luther, the one who started the Protestant Reformation, was one of them. He once got caught in a lightning storm and he thought he was going to die. As a Catholic, he prayed to one of the saints and made a vow that if he lived he would leave his pursuit of law and enter a monastery, a decision he later questioned, but since he had made a vow to God he never turned back. He later questioned a lot about his faith and posted 95 grievances to the door of his church in Wittenberg, Germany 500 years ago. That means we can trace the Protestant faith all back to a lightning storm.

As Hurricane Harvey decimated Southern Texas and Hurricanes Irma, Jose, and Marie have swept through the Caribbean, with Irma crushing parts of Florida and her remnants affecting us,

should we see these storms any differently from the lightning strikes that are occurring all over the earth? None of us are immune.

Of course, the closer we build to rivers and oceans and the more we stand out in lightning storms, the greater chance we have of being in the path of destruction such as this.

But some people want to make these disasters about whether God is a God of wrath and whether God is sending these weather phenomena as a part of His judgment.

Whenever natural disasters occur, some people wonder, “Is God judging us?”

This is true whether the fire is from the clouds or whether it’s in the form of bullets raining down from the 32nd floor of a high-rise in Las Vegas. Some people wonder, “Is God judging us? Is God determining who lives and who dies?”

This past week, once again, average Americans were out enjoying themselves, this time attending a country music festival when an evil man killed 59 people and wounded over 500 more with guns modified for rapid fire.

We are not likely to hear words of judgement coming from the mouths of conservative Christians like we did when a gunman killed 49 in a gay nightclub in Orlando. No, these people came from all walks of life. We’ve had 9 die in a church in a racially motivated killing in Charleston and 26 die at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. These killings pull at the fabric of our society.

This year 346 people are estimated to have been killed in American mass shootings, compared to 432 last year and 369 the year before that.

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/one-mass-shooting-every-day-seven-facts-gun-violence-america/>)

Today Justin began our time together with a powerful story of the day a gunman entered his high school. Don’t you know every time a report of a shooting occurs he and his family have a bit of PTSD from their experience 20 years ago?

These shootings become extremely personal when they affect people we know and when we stop and think how vulnerable we are to the same thing happening to us.

Last year a mass shooting occurred in Moultrie, Georgia, killing five and claiming a former member of our youth group at Trinity Baptist Church. Recently, a gunman entered a church in Nashville with a note vowing revenge for the Charleston shooting and opened fire, killing a mother of two, and wounding several including the pastor, before being disarmed.

One of those shot was the former high school coach of my daughter-in-law.

Every day natural disasters and tragedies are affecting someone in this world. Every day, the evil thoughts and actions are affecting innocent people in this world and the chance that we might know someone affected seems to be likely.

It has been this way ever since Cain jealously killed his brother Abel.

These kinds of tragic events are not new and they are not unique to our day.

Some people came to Jesus very disturbed that Pontius Pilate had some people from Galilee killed while they were offering sacrifices. Their blood was mixed with the blood of their sacrifices. These people were not even safe from tragedy while worshipping God, reminding us of some of our own recent tragedies.

The people who came to Jesus and wanted him to make some sense out of this tragedy were good people. Why did they suffer? Why did they die? Perhaps they were guilty of some sin that warranted such a death. Thus, God's punishment.

The theology of their day (evident in the book of Job) was that people bring bad things upon themselves because of the type of life they live. It was a cause and effect explanation. If something bad happened to you, you deserved it. If good fortune came to you, you deserved it.

There had also been another tragedy during this time. A tower in Siloam had fallen and it had killed 18 Galileans. Had there been a "Galilean Times" in print in Jesus' day, the people would have remembered reading about it. The obituaries of those killed would have been in the paper.

While there wasn't any of that available, people would have known about the tragedy and they would have likely known several of those who lost their lives.

So Jesus made the point that these Galileans were no worse sinners than any other person that lived in Galilee. When that tower fell, it killed whoever was in its path. Jesus wanted to get the point across, "If you had stood there, it would have killed you, too."

When a hurricane hits, or a plane crashes, or there is a mass shooting, or any number of tragedies could be named, they do not discriminate in who is affected.

They are going to affect racists and those who work against racism.

They are going to affect Democrats and Republicans.

They are going to affect atheists and people of faith.

They are going to affect illegal immigrants and American citizens.

They are going to affect the employed and those on food stamps.

They are going to affect those who have been benevolent and those who are selfish.

They are going to affect criminals and those who obey the law.

Sure, there are plenty of times that we bring judgment on ourselves, but today we are trying to make sense out of suffering that has no correlation to our actions as an individual.

May I remind you that Jesus hung on a cross and died the death of a criminal and that had no correlation to his actions?

He did so because he wanted to extend to us the grace of God, which is given freely to us. God's grace is given, not because we earn it, but because He loves us. God's grace has no bearing on our goodness.

God is used to sending the rain on the just and the unjust.

God is used to loving the sinner long before the sinner ever comes to understanding the love of God.

From the tragedy of the cross came the possibility that God's grace could be received by all of us. He demonstrated to us that his grace does not discriminate.

He will give grace to the racist and to the one who hates the racist.

He will give grace to Democrats and Republicans and to those who are not involved in politics at all.

He will give grace to atheists and to people of faith who sometimes think they have no need to repent.

He will give grace to Americans and to the illegals who love America.

He will give grace regardless of your job status or your economic status.

He will give grace if you have been benevolent or selfish; if you have broken the law or obeyed it.

But there is a final judgment coming and Jesus warned:

“I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:5)

There is a greater tragedy than death and death is coming. However death comes, whether it's a natural death, or whether we are struck with fire from the sky or from a mad man's bullet, it is coming.

Jesus tells us if we don't have a change of heart, we will all perish. If you are looking for things to get better in this life, don't get your hopes up. Work for it, yes! Pray for it, yes! "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On earth, as it is in heaven."

But remember, this is the world that produced the Holocaust. This is the world that produced the Crusades. This is the world that became so evil that God started over with a Great Flood.

This is the place of wars and rumors of wars. This is the place where there will always be storms, disease, tragedies, suffering of the innocent, and bad things are always going to happen to good people. Life is always going to be filled with unfair moments.

If you want to find God in all of this, then look to God's desire to save the world through his Son Jesus:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

Perishing is what happens to those who don't have eternal life.

Jesus went through suffering and death to defeat it. Otherwise, all the suffering, death, disease, storms, tragedies, and times when good people suffer for no clear reason at all, would leave us with no hope at all.

The prophet Isaiah said, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5)

We see this evident even as Jesus was dying on the cross and the thief next to him placed his trust in Jesus and asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. Jesus said, "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

In coming to earth, Jesus did not answer all our questions about God. Jesus did not answer all our questions about suffering.

Even though he once raised a child from the dead, many other children died while Jesus ministered around the region of Galilee. In fact, many children were killed by Herod when Jesus was born. Mary and Joseph escaped to Egypt because Joseph was warned in a dream by an angel.

Jesus gave no explanation for the suffering of those children or for the suffering of parents who lost those children.

Bad things happen. That's the kind of world we live in. Jesus seems to say that tragedies can happen to anybody at any time.

But the good news is that grace also happens. It can also happen to anybody at any time. We are often the recipients of that which we have not earned or deserved.

Jesus wants us to know that if we want that grace extended to us into eternity, then we need to have a change of heart and that comes through repentance.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph. 2:8-9)

I urge you to have a change of heart. Accept God’s grace today. Come to faith in Jesus. Regardless of what tragedy may happen to you in this life, you will never fall through the arms of God’s love and grace if you give your life to him.

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