

Tragedy and the Providence of God
Southern Gables Church (EFCA)
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In light of the events of this week I have decided to address the topic of "Tragedy and the Providence of God."

God's goodness and God's power come into question at a time like this. As I begin this sermon, I want you to hear again the Bible's clear declaration of our God's power AND goodness.

Read the following excerpts from Isaiah 40

"Go up on a high mountain.
lift up your voice with a shout,
"Here is your God!"
See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and his arm rules for him.
He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
Who has understood the mind of the LORD,
or instructed him as his counselor?
To whom, then, will you compare God?
What image will you compare him to?

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?
God sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.
He brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.
"To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.
Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?

He who brings out the starry host one by one,
and calls them each by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.
Why do you say, O Jacob,
and complain, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God"?
Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

I have not had opportunity to verify every detail of this story but I tell it to you as it was told to me:

Craig Scott of Columbine HS was in the library this past Tuesday with his friend Isaiah when two students armed with guns entered.
In front of Craig' s eyes they shot Isaiah and moved on to kill others.

Craig and some others then pretended to be dead as the gunmen left the room.

At that, Craig stood and pleaded with the remaining students to flee.

Hearing a plea for help, he reached down to assist Casey Ruegseggar of our church.

When after much difficulty they reached safety, Craig asked them all to pray and to pray for their friends and brothers and sisters who were still in the school.

For the next many minutes they prayed and watched as one after another of those for whom they were praying came out of the building.

As each one came out Craig commented about answered prayers.

But Craig's sister didn't come out – she died on Tuesday.

Some made it out alive, others didn't.

Craig prayed and it looked like his prayers were answered except in the most important prayer of all – for his own sister.

How do we make sense of that?

How do we respond?

What are we supposed to think?

How does God fit into all of this?

The tragedy at Columbine HS this week raises a host of feelings, thoughts and questions.

This experience has impacted all of us in different ways.

I believe there are many, those most directly affected, who are still just numb.

You aren't asking questions yet, you aren't angry, you are just overwhelmed with sadness – grief.

If you are one of those, please know that we are not pushing you today to come up with some answers and make some claims that you can't even think about much less feel in your numbness.

We will just come alongside you, love you and pray for you.

Even immediately following this service there will be people here at the front to meet with you, cry with you, hug you if you need it and just help hold you up today.

But though not everyone is as directly affected, they are nonetheless affected – and questions do come.

Some are fearful.

This week I have heard several parents tell of the fears their children are expressing.

Even for adults – those who allow themselves to think about this at all – there is an undefined insecurity that hovers about like a cloud.

Is life truly that fragile – that suddenly and quickly over?

Does an inattentive driver drift into my lane of traffic on my way home from church and snuff out my life?

Life isn't nearly as certain today as it was five days ago.

When we dare to ask the question it comes to something like this:

Is anybody in charge of life?

Is there any rhyme or reason to what happens?

Three possible conclusions immediately come to mind:

1. I'm in charge – of my own life, at least.

Though we often act like we are in charge of what happens in our lives, we quickly dismiss that conclusion when we are slapped in the face by the reality of capricious evil and untimely deaths.

I officiated at the funeral of a 43-year-old man of our church this past Tuesday – one week earlier he was at work and feeling fine.

Believe me there were a lot of very sober men at that funeral.

I don't think any of them is feeling "in charge" of life today.

2. The second possible conclusion we might reach about who is in charge is that we are simply the victims of fate – no one is in control!

Two-word bumper stickers proclaim this philosophy – stuff happens.

But that conclusion not only doesn't account for the evidence of good we experience every day, it also leads to only one of two responses:

Nihilism or Hedonism – despair or “devil-may-care”.

This fatalism is, to me, the most tragic conclusion of all.

3. The third conclusion possible to our question “Is anyone in charge of life?” is that “Yes, someone is in charge – and that someone is God.

But if, with all the evidence for the existence of God considered, we choose to believe in Him, we are then faced with another problem:

Whether it is the death of a 43-year-old husband and father, the magnitude of the suffering of Kosovo or the tragedy of Columbine HS, we are forced to ask what kind of God is this, who is in charge of life?

Living in the cold shade of the Columbine tragedy it appears that either:

God is good but he is not powerful (God feels dreadfully sorry for all those students and teachers, but he was powerless to stop the evil) – you are left with a powerless good God.

or else,

He is powerful but not good. (He had the full ability to stop that tragedy but he didn't care) – and you are left with a powerful evil God.

Those appear to be the only two options, but the Bible contradicts that appearance.

It declares over and over again that God is both all-powerful AND good.

But when death and senseless evil invade my life and my community, how can I believe that?

How can I hold to the goodness of God and the sovereign control of God in a world filled with so much evil?

I believe you can if you will do three things:

No, as you will hear in just a minute, this is not a formula.

I'm not, for a minute, pretending this is easy.

The first thing I think we must do when we are filled with questions and even doubts and anger is to **WRESTLE with God.**

The last thing we need is to give pat answers to the tough questions of life or to assume there are no answers.

“Pat answers” ignores reality and “no answers” succumbs to fatalism.

Don’t go to either of those extremes.

I am so impressed with many of the men and women of the Bible.

When life looked and felt impossible – they wrestled with God about it.

They shook their heads, they cried, they complained, they even accused God but they didn’t ignore him.

In the OT there is the account of the woman named Naomi in the book of Ruth.

Her husband and sons were dead and her livelihood was cut off.

She said to her neighbors: “Don’t call me Naomi, call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full but the Lord has brought me back empty...The Lord has afflicted me, the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.” (Ruth 1:20-21)

Elsewhere she made it plain that she believed fully in the goodness of God and she believed God was all-powerful and so she wrestled with God about what seemed inconsistent with his power and goodness.

Job wrestled with God, the psalmist David wrestled with God.

4 ½ years ago flight 427 from Chicago was approaching Pittsburgh when it crashed and in 43 seconds 132 people died.

Pastor Thad Barnum spent nearly two weeks at the crash site ministering to the coroners and clean-up crews.

One day as he approached a man unfamiliar to him, the man said, “You want some advice Bud?”

He didn't know Thad's name and without Thad responding, the man went on, "Don't make it easy. Don't tell us everything is going to be all right. This place is a hellhole. So tell it like it is. We are going to carry what we see here for the rest of our lives. Do me a favor. When you get up in your pulpit in the morning, don't let God off the hook!" (Where is God in Suffering and Tragedy y Thaddeus Barnum, Longwood Communications 1997, p168)

That's good advice. Don't let God off the hook. Wrestle with him.
 You don't have to make excuses for him.
 He can take care of himself.

Tell him what you feel and how deeply you feel it – but don't run away from him.

How can you believe in an all-powerful and good God in the face of tragedy? First of all WRESTLE.

Secondly, LOOK. Look at the rest of the evidence.

In the midst of the pain, the confusion and the immediate results of what has happened, it looks like God has failed either at being good or being powerful.

But look at the rest of the evidence.

His power is amply demonstrated in creation.

It is seen in the miracles he performed.

And most of all it is demonstrated in his own resurrection from the dead.

He is so powerful that he defeated death itself.

Could anything make his power more obvious and certain?

How about His goodness?

It is amply demonstrated in the lives we enjoy, the newness of each morning, the love of family and friends, **but most of all** his goodness is demonstrated in his death for you and me.

John Stott wrote, "I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross." P 335 The Cross of Christ, Intervarsity Press, 1986

In his short play entitled, "The Long Silence" he wrote,

"At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back...but some near the front talked heatedly... with belligerence.

"Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?" snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. We endured terror...beatings... torture...death!"

In another group a black boy lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched...for no crime but being black!"

Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in his world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered most. A Jew, a Negro, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed...child. In the center of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth – as a man!

"Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.

"At last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. **For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence.**"

(Ibid. 336-7)

Who can deny his goodness? He died for us.

And who, looking at the preponderance of evidence, can deny his power?

How then do we account for the tragedies we see around us?

I think the answer is "perspective"!

We look at the death of a loved one and are tempted to think as does the rest of the world that that is it – it's all over.

We look at tragedies as if they were the last chapter of the book.

We are so limited in our perspective, so unknowing of the future, that we despair.

I know I have shown this children's book to you before, but it makes the point so well I must read it to you again.

Billy and the Attic Adventure

What I am going to say next, I would not say to those who are the most deeply affected by this present situation.

It is not that it **isn't** true but that it is a truth that one must adopt before the trouble comes or after the pain has begun to subside.

If we alter the perspective we see that what was to us the worst possible experience is in fact within the sovereign and good plan of God.

In our pain and in our limited perspective we balk at that concept – it even sounds cruel – but the Bible teaches it over and over again.

Joseph of the Old Testament said, "others meant it for evil but God meant it for good".

James of the New Testament said consider it joy when you face trials because God uses it to bring spiritual maturity.

Not only do I challenge you to WRESTLE with God but I also challenge you to LOOK at the evidence of his power and goodness and his perspective.

Lastly, I challenge you to PRAY.

Prayer is an exercise of the will.

Prayer is a choice to believe God is listening.

Prayer demonstrates a willingness to be proven wrong about our feelings toward God.

Prayer is God's method for bringing his purposes to pass.

Prayer is an expression of dependence on God.

Prayer therefore is an act of faith.

Having wrestled with God, having looked at the evidence, I come finally to a point of decision: Will I choose to trust God or will I follow my pain into the despair of fatalism.

I don't pretend for a minute that is easy.

The struggle is intense – the pain immeasurable.

In recent weeks I have spoken to you of my own struggle with trusting God.

I am very aware that I have not answered all the questions that arise in a situation such as many families face today.

It is impossible for us now to fit all the pieces together so some pretty picture emerges.

Instead of answering all the questions, we come to a person – To the Lord Jesus – We trust him!

It was told to me that Craig Scott who prayed for the safety of others and his sister said, with the confidence only God can give – “My sister is with the Lord – I will see her again.”

I don't think Craig could say that glibly.
That statement, coming out of his experience, could only be said because he has wrestled with God, looked at the evidence, and has chosen to believe Jesus.

Providence:
God's protective care of his creation.