

Remember Who He is & How He Operates

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He has said, "I will never [under any circumstances] desert you [nor give you up nor leave you without support, nor will I in any degree leave you helpless], nor will I forsake or let you down or relax My hold on you [assuredly not]! Hebrews 13:5 Amplified

Three guys were in the wilderness and came to a ferocious stream. The first man prayed, "Lord, give me the strength to get across." His arms instantly grew and had many muscles and he swam across in two hours. The second prayed, "Lord, give me the tools and skill to get across" and suddenly he had chisels and wood and he made a boat in an hour and sailed across in 30 minutes. The third man prayed, "Lord, give me the intelligence to get across" and poof, suddenly he was a woman and she opened the map, walked five minutes upstream, and walked across the bridge.

It's a day in our country when we honor women, but it is also a day that I would like to have us have a bridge over which to walk, traversing a serious river that is, in many ways, ferocious to life and faith.

Last week we looked at four apocalyptic beasts in Daniel, beasts that create mayhem and suffering. The passage didn't tell us where they came from but it did tell us how God handles them. He meets them and defeats them. Period.

But we moderns ask, "Where did those beasts, that evil, come from?" But more pointedly, and possibly detrimentally, we ask, "God, why did you do that? Or allow

that?" Why the cancer? The earthquake? The swindle that lost our retirement?" I have a friend whose husband was killed in an ATV accident, leaving her a widow and their four children fatherless. She asks, people ask, "God, why did you do that? Or allow that?" Mother's Day is hard, as is Father's Day. Many people ask that question, "Why?" I've asked. You've probably asked.

This question unaddressed is like a bad knee we won't get looked at or have operated on. It gets us walking crooked, leads to pain elsewhere like in the hip, and has us not enjoying life as we think it ought to be enjoyed. With the question unaddressed, we don't fully trust God. You know how with some people you sleep with one eye open? We'll be that way with God. Not totally trusting him.

But the knee can be operated on, and the pain can go away, the gate can be restored, and life can be more pleasant. So, what do you say we operate and find some answers to the question? So, what do you say we open the map and find a bridge?

Now, Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a season for everything, to build up and to tear down, to weep and to laugh, and so forth. The Bible conveys to us that we should weep with those who weep. That's what we should do in that season. Jesus wept with the sorrow of his friends. What would be out of season, and what Jesus didn't do, was give a bunch of intellectual answers to people's tears. Suffering is real and the Bible doesn't in any way pretend that it isn't. But all of us, when the season is right, when we can and should thoughtfully explore the matter of why tragedy. It will give us some mental and spiritual aid, equipment when the time comes. It can be like the map and the bridge for the woman to cross the river.

Let's pray.

There are three principal things for us to consider and realize. First, this world God has given us is one of laws where there are causes and effects, where there is gravity, where there are multiplication tables, where life goes well with the Ten Commandments and not well without them. If some days the sun came up and some it didn't, some times touching a hot stove was bad and other times it was good, sometimes committing adultery was a blessing and other times it was a curse ... the world would be an unpredictable and unviable place for us to live.

There was a famous experiment in which an animal was given a reward for correct behavior and a zap for bad. Then the researchers mixed it up ... always a reward for bad behavior and bad for good. That was unnerving but handled by the rat. However, next came randomness -- sometimes a punishment for one behavior and sometimes a reward for the same behavior. The animal, after a time in this environment, just lay immobile, unable to move.

Our world has causes and effects and for basic life, if God interrupted it for this five times in my life that I thought it was needed and we did that for every person alive, how would it be? How would your changes affect me and on and on? And certainly when my five serious times were up, I'd want five more. God does enter the order of the world and works in it but in ways that the goodness of the world of law is basically preserved. And that world of law means pain around hot stoves, airplanes that fall out of the sky when engines fail, barometric pressure and storms ... that are sometimes devastating and at the same time renewing.

We think, in a case by case basis, “this event is tragic,” but in the whole, if God suspended the laws of life, and subtracted all possibility of meaningful consequences, life as we know it would be over.¹

Secondly, within this world of laws there is human free will and responsibility. God’s project is to have us relate to him and reign with him as independent and able beings. Wisdom, character, love, courage ... all these arise from a world with choices and responsibilities, with consequences.

I have children and I want them not to be robots. If they were, they would not make mistakes or do crazy things that cause me and others heartache. But since God is behind the world and he is love and love necessarily means free will, then there is choice, mistaken choices, pain, even dereliction. Even God cannot, and I say this respectfully, make love and free will and human responsibility to exist and take away all possibilities of failure or rebellion.

If you have a business you want to share with a son or daughter, there’s education, training, responsibility, testing, challenges...letting them get behind the wheel of a real car on real roads. If I take away making decisions from my children, take away consequences for my children’s decisions, I am taking away that which makes their human life meaningful. Perhaps on Mother’s Day we should remember that we talk about helicopter parents and mother’s apron strings and adults who have never grown up

¹ There would be no awesomeness to airplanes because there would be no real problems with gravity. There would be no meaning in speed limits because there would be no danger in careening around corners. Etcetera.

... think these things with respect to God and his humanity family. He wants us to be capable.

Much of what is tragic in life is a result of failed human responsibilities. Let's take an earthquake, for example, maybe in Haiti. In modern times we know where fault lines are and yet we build on them. Some of the people cannot afford to go anywhere else. The poverty comes from a history of slavery and awful dictators. Corrupt government officials pocket money and don't enforce building codes. Earthquake, collapsed buildings, tragic loss of life. The range of the tragedy certainly involving failed human responsibilities

And so it goes from consequences of pesticides with carcinogens, diets leading to health problems, and the egos and greed that breaks into a murder or a war.

So where do some of these apocalyptic beasts, some of the evil, some of these tragedies come from? From the enemy and enemies of God to be sure but also from one, the way the world works, and/or two, human dereliction.

The third thought for us as we ask the question of "Why, O God?" is to study not only what happens in the world through laws or human sin, but how he does look at and respond to the tragedies that give rise to the question.

Linda Smith was a congresswoman from the state of Washington. Listen to what she wrote,

I didn't want to touch the foul-smelling girl. I certainly didn't want to dramatically change my life again....It was one phone call to my office that forever changed my course. A missionary had called to tell me about the commercial sex industry and forced prostitution that was occurring in India. I

had to see for myself. After our conversation, I couldn't sleep...Could it really be as bad as he said? I would soon discover it was worse than I could have imagined or believed. In the midst of my hectic schedule, five days opened up for me to squeeze in a trip to India. On Falkland Road in Mumbai I was stunned by the reality of the sex trade industry. Women and children lined streets where raw sewage flowed in uncovered ditches. I found young girls, mere children, locked in rooms deep within brothels, or several stories up behind barred windows waiting for men who 'like them young.'

One girl in particular impacted me. She was a wisp of thing, filthy, alone. The conditions of her life were deplorable. The scent of a thousand men was upon her. She looked to be about the age of my granddaughter. I am doomed forever, her eyes said. 'Beyond help. Beyond hope.' Then I heard a still, small voice telling me touch her. I denied it but the voice returned. Finally, I reached for her. My mind had changed, already shocked, and scarred by the images I'd seen. But in the instant I touched this child, she fell into my arms and my heart was branded. Feeling the frail humanity of her heartbeat against mine. I knew I had to do something.

This is nauseating and God didn't make it happen. Such heinousness must stop. He wants us to make it stop. Our prayers and our dollars must go to stop this.

This is tragedy from human free will and failed human responsibility. And God is wanting to stop it. We speak of the still, small voice of God. That voice said, "Touch her." He wants to touch that hurting child. He wants us to touch that hurting child. And to touch the child afflicted by an earthquake.

All the systems of law, of medicine, of community that have evolved for people to do well, God has been behind these with ten thousand small voices in ten thousand men and women for ten thousand years. The voice is God's voice. Him wanting human flourishing, not human floundering.

Isaiah 59 says we have created, through sin again and again, pockets of tragedy. We have experienced pain. He knows that. He feels that. He, God, didn't stand apart ... aloof, judgmental, or even just weeping though weeping he did. He *entered* the scene in Jesus Christ. He experienced the worst with us, by us, for us.

There is no diagnosis, no crisis, no meanness, no dismay, no devastation, no tragedy that he has not personally seen or experienced. He has not turned away as many of us might be wont to do. No, there is no place, not even hell itself, for "he descended into hell," that he has not been. No hell where we might be, that he has not been, that we can be in, where he is not with us.

He became in flesh that touch he beseeched Linda Smith to give. In that touch he is willing and has absorbed that which causes grief and despair in life. And he not only absorbs the awfulness but he transmits the goodness and love of his life. He takes our pain and gives us his life.

Don't accuse God of meanness or capriciousness or craziness. See his world made good for living with laws that we might manage. See our sin and what our spurning of him has meant in terms of suffering. And see his love not letting us go through this life with its things to manage and its sin that afflicts.

And know that in the kingdom of God, this one, Jesus, is so big and so loving and so good that he is with every single sparrow that falls, he is tenderly by its side. Every single sparrow. He is that big and caring. He can and does do that. So there is no person who, when he or she is in pain or who dies, when there, no person who wants him, that he is not by their side. There is no person weeping in the night that he is not beside. And the reason that they who mourn can be comforted for real is that He has come and traversed the totality of human experience so there is no way we will be alone. And so while the Bible says, there is the possibility that our mothers might forsake us, God will not, will not, will not. Assuredly not.

If you'd like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors & elders of the church would welcome your call.

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