



Tragedy And Suffering

a resource from:



APOSTOLIC CHRISTIAN

Counseling and Family Services

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INTRODUCTION

Lamentations 3:21-26 “This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.”

We live in a world where tragedy and suffering are a present reality. Our awareness of these painful circumstances shift from vague realities that exist in our world to a fire that consumes when tragedy and suffering strike the things we love. They leave questions and hurt that cannot be ignored by the one who has experienced such difficulty. This paper is not an attempt to answer all the questions related to suffering but rather to highlight some biblical truths to hold onto in the midst of life’s storms. Jeremiah models this in the verses above from *Lamentations*. We have hope because of God’s faithfulness. We will not always feel hopeful nor will we always feel that God is merciful, but may we know these things to be true in the midst of circumstances that lead us to the darkest of nights. If you take a moment to read the verses in *Lamentations* 3 prior to the ones above, you will see it was not Jeremiah’s feelings or circumstances that led him to record *verses 21-26*. It is important to acknowledge that when questions arise from tragedy, no answer will remove all the pain one experiences when difficulties occur. Tragedy and suffering hurt. They hurt because they always involve loss.

This paper will focus on viewing the pain we experience through a biblical lens. While true, the biblical insights that will be reviewed do not remove the pain that accompanies tragedy. Instead, the truths covered here can help to put suffering into a larger context. We must be careful when personally experiencing or observing other’s suffering not to turn truth into a heavy burden that bludgeons the sufferer. Those who have experienced tragedy know all too well the hurt that can come from well-meaning comments which were full of truth but lacked wisdom or discretion about appropriate timing. As *Proverbs 25:20* says, “As he that taketh away a garment in cold weather, and as vinegar upon nitre, so is he that singeth songs to an heavy heart.” It is difficult not to fall into the trap of saying something that is true but lacking wisdom. If you are in the midst of tragedy, be patient with yourself and know these truths are to be read from a tone of compassion, love, and patience. Applying these truths without the grace and patience our Lord graciously bestows upon us would be approaching tragedy and suffering outside of a biblical context. This paper is not meant to be exhaustive but to touch on some of the essential truths that can help the believer who is experiencing suffering or for someone who wants to better understand suffering from a biblical viewpoint. Without a doubt, questions will remain. May we, by the grace of God, attempt to focus on the answers we are given in Scripture rather than the questions that have not yet been answered.

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TIMING IS ESSENTIAL – “IS THIS PAPER FOR ME? SHOULD I KEEP READING?”

This paper is meant to outline helpful truths for those who: 1) have experienced tragedy or 2) wrestle with all the tragedy they see in the world.

This paper is not meant for someone who is in the “crisis stage” right after experiencing a tragedy. Consider waiting at least two months after the tragedy before reading further. The reason for this is that during the initial stages after a tragedy the most beneficial helps are: 1) support from others, 2) coping with the immense pain, and 3) slowly reengaging in daily tasks. Healing after experiencing tragedy is a process and takes time. Initially, our mind and body go into “self-protection mode” which limits our ability to think, feel, and engage in life. During this time, it is important to lean on the supports you have around you. This might be your family, church family, or friends. These do not need to be individuals who have experienced exactly what you have experienced; rather, they should be individuals who can be present with you in the midst of your hurt.

After the “crisis stage” comes a time of processing through emotions, questions, and moving forward. A significant part of this time is acceptance of the loss while working through the difficult emotions and questions that arise from tragedy. This will take time and steady plowing. The truths outlined here can be helpful by providing information to common questions that arise from tragedy and suffering. If you are in the midst of great suffering, please be patient with yourself. Take the thoughts below that are helpful, and counsel with those close to you about when and how to approach the following truths. Hold on to what is helpful and move through the pieces that are not helpful.

TRAGEDY AND SUFFERING ARE PAINFUL – “SHOULD THE BELIEVER HURT?”

The believer has many wonderful and encouraging promises to dwell upon. In dwelling on these promises, it is important neither to minimize the surety of them nor to extend God’s promises beyond what they are. For example, we are promised sufficient grace (2 *Corinthians* 12:9), but we are not promised to feel as though God’s grace is sufficient. Though we, as believers, would like a life without difficulty we are not promised such a life. In fact Jesus tells us in *John* 16:33 that we will experience tribulation.

John 16:33 “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

The believer will experience suffering; and, with suffering comes pain. God does not ask nor expect His people to be free from hurt.

In fact, God has created human beings with a unique ability to connect. This ability is one of the great pleasures in life but also brings the possibility of deep pain. *Job* 3:1-3 shows how intense the pain can be from experiencing tragedy.

Job 3:1-3 “After this opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day. And Job spake, and said, Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.”

Those who are experiencing suffering must be allowed to hurt. God understands this and knows you feel pain when tragedy occurs. He does not enjoy or take pleasure in your pain, but He knows you will experience it when experiencing tragedy. We must also acknowledge that where there is hurt there are often difficult questions and intense emotions. These questions and emotions are not to be avoided or silenced. In the midst of pain, whether our own or others, we must try not to deny

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or avoid them. Too often, Satan tries to get the believer to buy into the lie that “if I had enough faith” then I would not experience pain or question God. Pain and the questions that arise from it are not necessarily a product of lacking faith. Instead, they are often a product of difficult situations. We will and should desire to shift out of the pain and questioning over time. To stay stuck in our pain and questioning for too long is not helpful, just as denying pain or the questions we have is not helpful. Instead, we need to acknowledge the pain and questions so we can move through them to a place where we more clearly see God and our need for His ongoing refining work in us.

1 Peter 1:3-9 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.”

WE LIVE IN A FALLEN WORLD – “WHY IS THERE SO MUCH SUFFERING IN THE WORLD?”

Prior to “the fall,” the world was a place where pain, death, and loss did not exist. There was no such thing as tragedy and suffering. One day Paradise will be restored. Until then, tragedy and suffering are a part of the world we live in and personally experience. We do not have to look far to see those who are experiencing excruciating circumstances, and some of you are currently in the midst of such circumstances. Your heart aches because of a loss or tragic event, and that ache likely leads to difficult questions.

The creation account in Genesis tells us that as God reflected on what He had created, He concluded that it was very good.

Genesis 1:31 “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.”

Prior to Adam and Eve disobeying God, they did not know of or experience tragedy. They lived in a world where there was no pain, death, or loss. Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God is the first tragedy recorded in Scripture; and one that affects each one of us.

Romans 5:18 “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; . . .”

When sin entered the world, it led to the corruption of creation which includes our bodies, the earth, etc.

Romans 8:22-23 “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.”

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Sin has led to the presence of suffering in the world. It would be correct to say that all tragedy can be traced back to the sin of Satan, Adam and Eve. However, the suffering we see all around us today may or may not be directly linked to sin.

Tragedy and suffering have one source but different causes:

- The source of all tragedy is Adam and Eve's sin.
 - Their sin has affected the whole of God's creation (i.e., We live in a fallen world.).
 - Therefore, we experience natural disasters, disease, death, etc.
 - In this general sense, all of mankind experiences suffering in that we live in a fallen world.
- Sin's direct and indirect causes of tragedy.
 - Direct – someone's sin leads to a tragedy.
 - A drunk driver kills someone.
 - Murder, rape, etc.
 - Lying, deceit, etc.
 - Indirect – *tragedy occurs but not as a direct result of someone's sin.*
 - A child is killed in an accident.
 - A tornado.
 - Cancer.

Sometimes tragedy occurs as direct punishment by God (e.g., see the story of Korah in Numbers 16) or a consequence of an individual's sin (e.g., consequences in the life of King David), but other times tragedy occurs simply as a result of living in a fallen world where death and sorrow are a reality. For example, a natural disaster may not be the result of God punishing the sin of those who experience it. Tragedy can also occur from sinning against each other. More often than not, we are not able to determine a specific cause of suffering. Therefore, we must be very careful about assigning blame or labeling the causes of suffering. For example, those who came to be with Job blamed him for his suffering, but they were wrong in assuming Job had done something which was leading to the suffering he was experiencing and were chastised by God for it (*Job 42:7-9*). In another instance (*John 9:2-3*), the disciples asked Jesus about whose sin caused blindness in a man, his sin or his parents' sin. Jesus responded, "*Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.*"

While these truths do not diminish the pain of tragedy, they can be helpful to focus the believer from trying to identify the source of tragedy to acknowledging that pain occurs in a fallen world. Not only does pain occur in a fallen world, but we are not due answers about why tragedy occurs (*Job 38-42*). Instead, we are to be pointed to God through our pain and long for a day when we will be in the presence of our great God.

Philippians 3:20-4:1 "For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself. Therefore, my brethren dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved."

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GOD LOVES HIS PEOPLE – “DOES GOD CARE ABOUT MY PAIN? IS GOD GOOD?”

Scripture paints a picture of God as being loving (*1 John 4:10 & 16*), abundantly merciful (*1 Chronicles 16:34*), and deeply connected to His people (*Jeremiah 29:11, John 11:33-35*). We must hold onto this view of God as it is how He describes Himself in Scripture. We don't find a distant God in the Bible; instead, we find a people who *feel* pain and distance from God. This is consistent with our experiences today. Many who are hurting wonder where God is and feel as though He may have left them. Job certainly felt like God's presence was very elusive, despite his belief that God was there. In *Job 23:8-10* he expressed it this way, “Behold, I [Job] go forward, but he [God] is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: on the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him: But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”

We can take courage and comfort in the fact that we do not find an abandoning God in Scripture. Instead, we find a God whose ultimate desire is to care for and heal our wounds.

Isaiah 61:1-3 “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.”

The gospel message is that God desired to reconcile His people to Himself and was willing to do so even though He knew it would cost Him. The cross is God's ultimate expression of His love for His people. He knew He would have to allow and destine His Son to bear what was rightfully due those who killed His Son (*Acts 2:23*). This was God's plan because of His mercy and love for His creation. There is no more powerful way to demonstrate love for another than to lay down your life for them (*John 15:13*). There is no clearer display of God's heart toward us than the cross. Surely we must conclude that God cares more deeply about us than we can imagine and as He was willing to remedy our greatest need through experiencing His greatest pain. Jeremiah captures God's heart toward His people in one of the Bible's most familiar verses.

Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”

These words contain comforting truths. Do you think Jeremiah was feeling good at the time he penned these words? While we don't know for sure, we do know that Jeremiah faced difficult circumstances when these verses were written. In fact, Jeremiah and those he was communicating with were in captivity. False prophets were telling the people lies, one of which was that their captivity would be short (*Jeremiah 27:16*). Jeremiah responds with the true message from God in chapter 29. Many Christians hold onto the hope and good news from *Jeremiah 29:11*, and they rightly should. However, what we often don't remember or realize is that Jeremiah and the people he was sharing this message with were in captivity and were going to be in captivity for some time. Therefore, it is important to remember God's thoughts toward you are “thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end,” even when finding ourselves feeling difficult emotions and experiencing excruciating circumstances.

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GOD IS SOVEREIGN – “IS GOD IN CONTROL?”

This question is asked in many different forms. In *Revelation 6:10-11* God is asked why He has not judged the wicked.

Revelation 6:10-11 “And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.”

Most of us don't understand how God can be in control when awful things happen with seemingly no consequence to the wicked (See *Psalms 73*). Even in the passage from Revelation above, the question is asked to God, and the response is simply to wait and know judgment will come.

God is never confused or surprised by what happens to us. He is grieved when sin occurs and when He sees individuals hurting, but He is not taken by surprise. God knows the beginning, middle, and the end of our life stories. Scripture teaches that everything that happens in this world will be used for the ultimate good of God's people (*Romans 8:28*). This is not to say that all things are good, but that God knows and holds the outcome in His merciful hands. The good news for every believer is that the end of the story is written, and it ends well for God's people. God is in control of the story.

1 Peter 4:19 “Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.”

Even when tragedy and suffering occurs in your life, God means them for good while Satan means them for evil. Perhaps there is no way for this truth to not come into question, at some level, for an individual who is experiencing suffering. In the midst of tragedy we hurt and do not understand why the tragedy occurred or how God could use it for good. More times than not, we do not see how this can be true, yet we are to move toward believing that God is faithful to His promises and that in Heaven we will be able to see the full picture.

In the midst of our questioning, the Lord tells us He has a plan and a purpose. We are asked to trust Him in this though we do not understand. In the end, evil will be judged and our pain will be removed; until then we are asked to trust God in the midst of our pain, believing He will give us the grace necessary to go forward. *2 Corinthians 12:9* “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

The process of moving through our hurts and questions takes time. May we thank the Lord for His patience with us and pray for wisdom to know when to just allow ourselves/others to experience difficult emotions and when to push towards moving through hurt. Believing God is in control does not mean that we understand what God is doing, nor does it mean that we always “feel” it to be true that God is in control. Instead, belief in God's sovereignty is simply holding onto what we can read from Scripture to be true.

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Isaiah 55:8-9 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

The truth is that God is good, God is in control, and God cares about you.

Nahum 1:7 “The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him.”

Holding onto these truths is extremely difficult when circumstances and emotions push them into question. We need the grace of God and the community of believers around us to hold onto these truths for us when the pain of tragedy is too intense for us to hold onto them ourselves.

PARADISE AWAITS THE BELIEVER – “WILL THE PAIN EVER STOP?”

Hebrews 12:1-3 “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.”

These verses from Hebrews can be encouraging to the suffering soul. When tragedy hits, we feel excruciating pain and often wrestle with difficult questions. The resulting weight can feel like too much to bear. We are encouraged in Hebrews to “run with patience” the path that is before us. Healing after tragedy means restarting daily tasks and reengaging in life. It also means shifting our focus from our circumstances to our hope, Jesus. We are not to avoid or discount the pain but to purposefully shift our focus from what has happened toward where we are headed. Jesus gave us an example of how to walk through tragedy.

He hurt -> He questioned -> He overcame -> He is in Paradise

One of the most comforting truths in Scripture is the destination that awaits the believer. Scripture paints Heaven as an unimaginably wonderful place where God’s people are in perfect communion with Him and each other. Knowing the end of the story can give us strength and motivation to endure in the midst of great difficulty. One way to think about this truth is to consider how your current situation will look in 30, 50, or 100 years when you will have been ushered into eternity. For the believer, this means we will be in a place so wonderful that words cannot fully describe it. This reality leads the Apostle Paul to write the following in *Romans*:

Romans 8:18, “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.”

We cannot imagine a place so wonderful that it would so greatly diminish our current pain, but the Word of God tells us we have such a place to look forward to! Knowing Heaven is our destination does not take away the pain of tragedy, but it does give an anchor of hope we can hold onto. We hurt and are invited to express our pain to the Lord who welcomes us into His presence (*Hebrews 4:15-16*). We trust that according to God’s grace and mercy, we will one day experience the fulfillment of *Revelation 21:4*.

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Revelation 21:4 “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

Tragedy is not the end of the story for the believer. While we hurt today and see so much suffering around us, we anticipate the reality of eternity in a place where tragedy, suffering, and pain do not exist. Can you imagine the wonder and excitement of being in a place where we no longer have to wrestle with Satan, the flesh, or a fallen world? All that will be left is peace, harmony, and joy. The only questions we will have are ones that lead us on a journey of exploration of Heaven and the excitement of seeing “face to face” and “knowing and being known” (*I Corinthians 13:12*). We will be in God’s presence and rightly know His goodness all of the time, which is the essence of Paradise.

YES! GOD IS GOOD

The goodness of God is often what comes into question when tragedy and suffering occur. We wrestle with questions like “How could a good God. . .” or, “If God is loving why would He. . . .” Perhaps the wise answer to these questions is to weep over the pain and circumstances that stirs such questions. After doing so, it would be wise to contemplate if a more helpful question would be to simply ask, “Is God good?” After all, that is the question at the core of the other questions.

Scripture answers the question of “Is God good?” with a resounding, “Yes! God is good. Even when circumstances are not.” Scripture gives us truths about God, but we are not always told how two truths fit together. For example, we are told God is good, but we sometimes have difficulty seeing the goodness of the Lord in our specific situation. Instead, we are asked to trust what we are told about God in the midst of circumstances that seem contrary to the truth we read in Scripture.

Psalms 100:5 “For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations.”

1 Chronicles 16:34 “O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever.”

Nahum 1:7 “The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him.”

We started in Lamentations, and it seems fitting to end there as well. We serve a good and merciful God. Even so, we dwell in a fallen world where we see and experience suffering. When Satan tries to convince us that these realities bring into question God’s existence or goodness, let us cling to the promises and truths we have been given in His word. Take a moment to scan the statements in the headings above as a reminder of some of the promises and truths we have from God related to tragedy and suffering.

Lamentations 3:21-26 “This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. 26 It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.”

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Additional Resources:

Disclaimer: The accompanying materials have been reviewed by ACCFS staff and have been found to be helpful for people wanting to learn about certain issues. While this information has been screened and can be helpful, readers are encouraged to be discerning of any doctrinal concerns. Distribution of these materials is not meant to imply an endorsement by the Apostolic Christian Church of the author, publisher, or organization that created the materials. If you have any questions or concerns about these materials please contact ACCFS directly or speak with your Elder.

- Dobson, James [When God Doesn't Make Sense](#).
- Jackson, Tim [When Tragedy Strikes: Finding Security In A Vulnerable World](#). RBC Booklet
- Lewis, C.S [The Problem of Pain](#). An intellectual Christian response to questions about suffering.
- Lewis, C.S [A Grief Observed](#). A personal account of struggling through grief and loss.
- Yancey, Philip [Where Is God When It Hurts?](#)

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