

When Tragedy Strikes

A Christian Response to Tough Times

Many religions revere an omnipotent god capable of capriciously wrecking hardship upon his faithful without jeopardizing their devotion. Christianity worships a God who is celebrated as omnipotent, holy, loving, ultimately and absolutely good.

So how should a Christian respond to: the death of “innocent” babies, cancer, destruction wrought by tsunamis, tornadoes, indiscriminate ravages of floods, famine, and God's willingness to tolerate evil, evil people?

Subjectively we react with anger, pain or outrage when tragedy strikes those we cherish, or when it offends our convictions about how things should be. Objectively we can acknowledge our inability to see and assess distant consequences. Even the most painful event may turn out for a larger good.

A major cause of devastating grief and confusion can be our false expectations. If our beliefs about God are out of step with what is revealed in Scripture, then the pain from personal tragedy may be multiplied many times over as we begin to question the very foundations of our faith.

Jesus' response when asked why people prematurely died in a disaster is insightful. Were the victims worse sinners than others? No! Were victims more guilty than others? No! Jesus argues that it is not the cutting short of life, but the fact that life terminates that should pre-occupy us [Luke 13:1-5]. Jesus' point is that with physical death comes a decisive encounter with God, an encounter that does deal with sin [Hebrews 9:27]. The degree of sinfulness is not the real issue.

We are not endowed with an innate ability to recognize the evil quality of specific events. God has not revealed why some suffer and others do not. As Christians, given the example of the cross, the affirmation of Scripture, we have good reason to trust in the essential goodness and love of God.

Jesus "in the days of his flesh, offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested" [Hebrews 5:7-9].

Pain and suffering often generates a profound sense of loneliness. We imagine we are all alone, cut off from everyone. We feel no one can possibly understand. The truth is, Jesus does understand. "Cast all your anxiety on Jesus because he cares for you" [1 Peter 5:7].