

Tragedies

Luke 13:1-5

When bad things happen

Every year a group of young people from different Christian churches in Eindhoven participate in a mission trip to the Ukraine. It is good to serve the Lord and get exposure to mission. But last Sunday evening tragedy struck: returning from the mission trip, one of the two buses rolled over on a German motorway. Tim, aged 19, died on the spot. Three others remain in hospital. It is the nightmare parents and trip organizers pray will never happen. A tragedy! Why did this happen? Who is to blame? Where is God in this?

The friends and family of innocent bystanders killed or maimed in recent terrorist attacks are also full of unanswered questions. We live in a world where handicapped children are born, mudslides and floods destroy homes, violence, disease and 'silly' accidents take away our loved ones. In time, the shock subsides but unsettling questions may remain. How did the Lord Jesus respond to tragedy?

Jesus and two tragedies

In Luke 13:1-5 we read of two tragedies: Some Passover pilgrims from Galilee had been butchered by Roman troops in the Temple while offering their sacrifices, "...Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices" (v.1). This is the same Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who later ordered the Lord Jesus to be whipped and then crucified. The second tragedy took place south of Jerusalem, at Siloam, where there was a well-known pool (John 9:7-11). We are told that eighteen people "died when the tower in Siloam fell on them" (v.4), probably the collapse of one of the large towers supporting the aqueduct. Where was God when these tragedies took place?

The Jews, like most of us, had developed simple answers to explain difficult or complex situations. We humans love simple answers. Mystery is associated with weakness. Knowledge helps us feel in control. At the time, Jews would naturally conclude that those who died must have been guilty of some serious sin. The survivors, like themselves, were therefore 'better' people. Our personal sin or sinful lifestyle may explain some forms of suffering. "God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Gal 6:7). The sin of others, like that of Pilate, may explain other bad things. But most tragedies do not have anything close to satisfying explanations.

These two local tragedies, I think, would be the ideal context for the Lord Jesus to give us some insights into the cause of tragedies and meaningless suffering. But He does not. Neither does He use the occasion to make a political statement against the Roman oppressors. Neither does He comment on the lifestyle of those who died, or attempt to correct the Jewish accusing logic. Were those who died worse sinners? Jesus answered, "I tell you, no! But unless you *repent*, you too will all perish" (v.3,5). He uses these tragedies to urge them to turn the searching light not on

others but on themselves. How does God view me, my priorities, my way of life?

A call to change our mind

In the Bible, the word *repent* means 'to change one's mind'. Of course, we are called to repent from sinful acts and lifestyles. But the Biblical call to *repent* is broader. We may hold wrong convictions about ourselves, about who our heavenly Father is and how He works – what He must do and what He can't do. Yes, God's love, goodness and faithfulness towards us remain steadfast, but our own reasonings and expectations may need adjusting. We may need to 'change our mind', to drop some simple man-made explanations, to bring our thinking more in line with God's reality. In short, we may need to *repent*. I think this is what A W Pink had in mind when he wrote "The Christian who has stopped repenting has stopped growing". Tragedies are opportunities to reflect, and where necessary, *repent*.

Growing through tragedies

The struggle to hold on firmly to God's love, goodness and faithful in the midst of tragedy is a challenge to every true believer. Nearly 300 years ago, Catharina von Schlegel blessed generations of God's people with her song "Be Still, My Soul". It does not answer our many troubling questions, but it does help us bring our soul and experience in harmony with who God is:

Be still, my soul: The Lord is on thy side
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain
Leave to thy God to order and provide,
In every change, He faithful will remain
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul: thy God does undertake
To guide the future as He has the past
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake
All now mysterious shall be bright at last
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
His voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.

More recently, Matt Redman has also been used by God to bless us with his song "Blessed be The Name of The Lord".

Blessed be Your name
When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's 'all as it should be'
Blessed be Your name

Blessed be Your name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your name

You give and take away (2x)
My heart will choose to say
Lord, blessed be Your name

When our heavenly Father allows tragedy to come our way, choose to hold fast to the unchangeable truths of who He is. In some of our difficult moments, my wife and I have also sung these priceless songs. Maybe they can bless you also: 'Be still, my soul: The Lord is on your side'. 'In every change. He faithful will remain'. 'You give and take away. My heart will choose to say: Lord, blessed be Your name'.

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