Tragedy, Sorrow, and Untimely Death Examined from Scripture

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2012

In the wake of tragic and senseless loss of life, it is common to hear questions such as,

- Where was God?
- Could he not have prevented this?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?

While scripture doesn't tell us everything, it does provide much that can help us understand why these types of things happen.

**Scripture tells us that all people have sinned.**

As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understands, there is none that seeks after God. They are all gone out of the way; they are together become unprofitable; there is none that does good, no, not one.

Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways:

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:10-23)

**Scripture tells us that the wages of sin is death.**

For the wages of sin is death... (Romans 6:23). Those wages must be paid. That's why there can be no remission of sin without the shedding of blood, which is saying there can be no forgiveness of sin without death. (Hebrews 9:22). To overlook sin and allow it to go unpunished would be unjust. But God is a just God and therefore He cannot overlook sin. If God were unjust, he would be denying himself, something the Bible says he cannot do (2 Tim 2:13).
Scripture tells us that God is good, merciful, and abounding in love.

Given that all have sinned and that the wages of sin is death, the real wonder is why any of us are still alive and why anyone enjoys moments free of pain and anguish! We all deserve to die. The fact that some people have died and we did not is only the mere grace of God in extending the life of those who deserve to die. The fact that God causes some to live into their 80’s, or 90’s or even their 100’s while others only live to 1 or 2 years of age does not make God unjust. If it is pure justice we want, no one would be alive. Praise God for his grace and mercy! He is patient and slow to anger.

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." Exodus 34:5-7

Scripture tells us that on the cross Christ was afflicted by his own Father

When Jesus suffered, it was the hand of God that bruised him. God did not merely "stand by" or "look away" while Jesus suffered on the cross. At the cross God himself poured out his own wrath on his one and only Son. Jesus bore the wrath of God on the cross, not the wrath of Satan or the Jews.

Surely he hath borne our grief, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he
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made his grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Isaiah 53:4-10

Isaiah says that Jesus is smitten of God and that the Lord laid on Jesus our iniquity and the punishment for it.

But also note that it pleased God to bruise Christ. It was according to God’s plan. This was not something he was “forced” to do contrary to his sovereign will.

**Scripture tells us God ordained the crucifixion of Christ**

To rightly understand the depth of the love of God, it is important to understand that Christ’s crucifixion was not an accident that God never intended or hoped would not happen. Neither was it merely permitted by God as if God reluctantly gave permission to Satan. It was ordained by God. Scripture tells us that God decreed the death of his Son because He so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son that whosoever believes on him should not perish. His love supplies what his justice demands. At the same time it should also be remembered that God’s ordaining of Christ’s crucifixion does nothing to relieve the responsibility of the wicked people who crucified an innocent man. God’s sovereignty does not diminish the guilt of the wicked people whom God used as the instruments of his wrath (see Romans 9:18-24 for Paul’s answer to how both can be true at the same time).¹

You men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as you yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and

¹ Lest there be any misunderstanding, it should be noted that when men perpetrate atrocities on others, it is the duty of man (i.e. the civil magistrate) to bring God’s wrath on them (see Romans 13). It is also true that such atrocities are ordained by Jehovah, who is the only Sovereign.
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foreknowledge of God, you have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Acts 2:22-23

This is the counsel of God which determines all things. As Paul described it to the Ephesians (Eph 1:11) In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will:

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, Acts 4:27-28

The Wonder of the Cross

The great wonder of it all is that this humiliation, physical and emotional anguish, excruciating pain, and death was what we deserved. For those who are Christ's, He bore the wrath of God in our place. At the cross, Christ's blood was poured out as a vicarious substitute for our blood to appease (or propitiate as Rom 3:25 says) the wrath of God. At the cross we see the justice of God in demanding an atoning sacrifice for our sin and the grace of God in providing the spotless Lamb for the sacrifice. We see God pouring out his wrath for our sin on his sinless Son. The only person that has a right to complain about God's justice for taking a life is his Son, Jesus Christ. But Christ willingly went to the cross. He voluntarily offered himself as a sacrifice. God was not unjust when he poured out his wrath for our sin on Christ because Christ voluntarily offered up his life as a sacrifice.

And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savor. Ephesians 5:2

Who needs not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself. Hebrews 7:27

For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. Hebrews 9:26
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Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father. John 10:17-18

Scripture tells us that God chastens only those whom He loves

This raises the obvious question, “If Christ has satisfied the wrath of God for our sin so that we are no longer under condemnation for it, then why do we still experience sorrow and suffering?” Scripture gives us the answer. It tells us that we still have sin dwelling in us, that we are not yet perfectly holy. Trials and tribulations are one means through which the Holy Spirit works patience and other fruit so that we become more and more conformed to Christ’s image. It is for this reason that we are commanded to count it a joy when we fall into various trials (James 1:2). Trials and tribulations are given for our own good. They are a sign that he loves us. Sometimes they are given in his displeasure for our sin. Sometimes they are given to test us. Sometimes they are given to teach and refine us. But always they are given because of his love.

And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaks unto you as unto children, my son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loves he chastens, and scourges every son whom he receives. Hebrews 12:5-6

If ye endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; ... But if you be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are you bastards, and not sons. Hebrews 12:7-8

... but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Hebrews 12:10-11

The Sovereignty of God and the Responsibility of Man

A frequent and often troubling question, especially for those that have suffered great tragedy in their life, is how God’s sovereignty is harmonized with man’s responsibility. Often these are seen as competing with each other so that to the extent God is sovereign, man is
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off the hook; and to the extent man is responsible, God is not. But these two doctrines are both explicitly taught in scripture and live in complete harmony with each other both on the pages of scripture and in our ordinary experience. As we have seen God is 100% sovereign and man is 100% responsible. If this seems unbiblical, please go back and read Acts 2:22-23. In one sentence Peter calls the Jews wicked for doing the very act that he also says God had predestined to occur.

Our actions are simply one means through which God accomplishes his purposes. Prayer changes things not because it changes what God has decreed to do from before the foundation of the world, but because it results in a different outcome than if we had not prayed. The prayers of the saints, which are ordained by God like everything else, are the means by which God is moved to accomplish his purposes. In decreeing events, he has ordained the means and causes as well as the ends.

A comparison to driving and safety may be helpful in explaining what this means. One often hears the admonition to drive safely because our safety is dependent on our alert obedience of the rules of the road. If we proceed through a red light into high speed on-coming traffic, we'll likely be killed. If we stop and only proceed when the path is clear, we'll live. This does not imply that God is not sovereign over our actions at traffic lights. Rather in ordaining the outcome at each traffic light, God also ordains the means through which he will accomplish those outcomes. Usually he uses our alert obedience of traffic rules as the means by which he brings us safely through the intersection. Occasionally he uses other means to bring us safely through despite our failure to follow safe driving practices. But sometimes we do not get safely through the intersection, even when we take normal safety precautions. The one thing we can always say is that God is good, his mercy is everlasting, his truth endures to all generations, he ordained whatever happens, and the people involved are fully responsible for whatever actions they did or did not take.

Great tragedies may lead some to ask (like Habakkuk did in Hab 1:13) how God can use a more wicked person to execute his wrath on less wicked people. God's answer to him was that the just shall live by faith (Hab 2:4). So God is just in his judgments. No one receives a whit more punishment than what they deserve and often far less in this life. But he is also loving. God is love and he cannot deny himself. This may seem hard to fathom. How can God be loving in his fury?
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We need to remember what the Bible means by love. To love someone means that we obey the law with respect to them. We respect, preserve, and promote their life, health, chastity, property, and good name.

Paul told the Romans,

"Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Romans 13:8-10.

When God judges according to his law, bringing a just sentence on those who break the law, He is fulfilling the law and, in so doing, he is being loving.

The Real Tragedy

The real tragedy is those who die outside of Christ. Their trials are a foretaste of God's wrath; their death the end of his grace and patience. But even in this, God is just and loving. Abraham expressed this faith in God's character as God was about to destroy Sodom saying, "Shall not the Judge of the entire word do what is just?"

Death is a solemn reminder of the reality of our sin and the reality of God's wrath that is upon it. When God takes the life of an unborn baby, it is a reminder that no one is innocent. As Jesus reminded a questioner, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." Mark 10:18

For a nation that has mocked God’s law, scorned his kindness, banned his name from their schools except if used in vain, and his remembrance from the public square, and used his gifts to persecute his bride and kill children, it is the height of arrogance to ask why God has forsaken us. What right do we have to be insulted or surprised when God replies in his righteous fury and destroys our children in his indignation?