

Tragedy and God's Will

GENESIS 50:15-21

Dr. C. David Matthews
Good Samaritan Church
Orlando, Florida

You remember Joseph. The favorite son. The boy with the coat of many colors, who was so intimidating to his brothers. Joseph the dreamer. A boy who dreams that much, and talks about it that much, has to be a problem to his siblings.

One day his brothers hit upon the idea of selling him to a passing caravan. Maybe you've had similar thoughts about your relatives! Years later a famine strikes, and the brothers have to go to Egypt to plead for food. Little do they know that the high Egyptian official to whom they are speaking is their brother, whom they sold many years before into slavery.

He toys with them a while, then reveals himself. "*I am Joseph.*" They are shocked and become anxious, as you can imagine. He tells them to not be afraid. He says that, despite all the evil they intended, God has been strangely at work.

Read Genesis 50:15-21

The summer of 1973 was the last of the summers I spent writing my doctoral dissertation. I worked in a tiny cubicle in the library of Southwestern Seminary. In that small space was a large, very old desk, and an ancient revolving bookcase. Generations earlier, the desk had belonged to B.H. Carroll, an early president of the seminary. A bit more recently, but still long ago, the revolving bookcase had belonged to a former pastor of the church I was at that time pastoring, Dr. Jeff Ray, who had come to the seminary to teach preaching. I sat between the desk and the bookcase that summer and wrote 200 pages on the providence of God.

I had decided before I began my graduate studies that I wanted to do my dissertation on providence. Throughout the twentieth century it was the most neglected of the classical Christian doctrines, yet it was the very place where so much of the water hit the wheel for me.

What does it matter what God has done, or what God will do, if we cannot talk about what God is doing now? How much does it matter how active God was in the history of Israel and the early church, if we cannot believe that God is actively involved in everyone's history...in all of history? So, that was a summer more than any other dedicated to understanding providence.

Yet it was a summer intermittently interrupted by bad news. I had trouble working on divine providence because of human tragedy.

At the first part of the summer I had to leave my cubicle because a seminary faculty member, the father of one of the student members of my church, died of a heart attack. There was the evening I was working late, alone, with my whole family in Denver, and my work was interrupted by a long distance call that my mother had been hospitalized with cancer. I couldn't work anymore that night. There was the evening, a Wednesday evening, I was tying up loose ends for the rest of the week at church so I

could return to the seminary. Suddenly the word came that one of our best, a bright piece of the future, had been killed less than an hour earlier in a senseless automobile accident. There was the morning when my clock radio awakened me in the dorm room I was renting with two horrifying items of news. One had to do with mass murder, perversion and sadism beyond belief; the other was about a small child apparently trapped in a car somewhere in New Mexico with the body of his dead father, crying for help over a c.b. radio.

We, the people who affirm the providence of a gracious God, have so many days when the word "*providence*" sounds like a cruel joke, and we want to cry, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken us!*"

This is one of the very oldest philosophical questions. "*Whence comes evil?*" "*Why is there so much suffering in the world?*"

The church has been so concerned to preserve the belief that God is in control of the world that it has rushed in with quick answers. Too often they have been inadequate and even unfortunate answers.

We have been told, for example, that when tragedy comes we are to say, "*This is what is best.*" We need to be careful with the words, "*All things work together for good.*" First, this is not the most accurate translation of Romans 8; and, second, as I heard a Christian doctor say, it just won't sell at places like M.D. Anderson. There are plenty of situations that do not turn out good for anybody.

We have been told, "*Tragic things happen to teach us something, to make us stronger, or more faithful, or more courageous.*" People say, "*God won't let anymore come to me than I can bear.*" This comes, not from a bad translation, but from a simple misreading of Scripture. That isn't in the Bible. Look around. Lots of people have more dumped on them than they can carry. If that were not true, there would be no such thing as suicide.

We have been told, "*Tragic things happen because God is punishing us for something.*" Now, you may think you know better, but there is something innate in all of us that causes us to feel that way. You get a punch in the midsection, and as you go to your knees and gasp for breath you almost automatically ask, "*What have I done to deserve this?*" It's an ancient religious conviction that evil and suffering are God's way of punishing sin. But the Bible says the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.

I must tell you that, between the heavy, scarred desk and the funny, old bookcase, I found no glib and easy answers, no smooth and satisfying solutions, to the "*Why?*" of human tragedy. I warn you, in a week such as this, to beware of simple answers. If our Christian faith is not to be a pious escapism, then there are some things we need to be honest about.

These things seem to me to be true:

1. Much tragedy comes simply as a result of statistical probability.

The created world is – to a large degree – predictable. Things usually react in expected ways. Of course we are not locked in a world of Iron Law, as science is discovering today. But things generally follow predictable patterns of reaction.

Will Spong says that one of God's gifts is contained in the fact that, if you put your eye in front of a line drive, you will lose your eye. Or, take penicillin. Most are

healed by it. But some are so allergic to it that it can kill them. Is it the will of God in both cases? I don't think so...not directly. It is the result of statistical probability.

Here is one child with leukemia in a room full of healthy children. Here is a man who dies of a stroke long before he has reached the average person's life expectancy. Here is a woman who – in the prime of a useful life – develops a mysterious malignancy. Here is one house in a block of houses that is destroyed by a tornado. This young man was killed in the collapse of Tower 1, while another was, fortunately, late for work. The will of God? What kind of God? More likely, the result of statistical probability.

2) Much tragedy comes as a result of human limitations.

Given the charge to be the caretakers of the earth, we have taken giant strides in developing the world's potential, but we have not yet mastered creation. In some ways we are still quite primitive, even as we continue to discover the earth's resources and harness them for good.

Fifty years ago the cancer patient was told, *"We can give you morphine for pain, but there is no drug to cure your malignancy."* Twenty-five years ago the cancer patient was told, *"There is a drug available that has produced some tumor shrinkage in some patients. We will try it with you."* Today the cancer patient is told: *"We will treat you with chemicals and other agents. There is a chance of long-term control of the disease. A remission of five years, which now comes in a majority of cases, will mean that we can cure you of cancer."*

Some of us remember those days when so many lives were permanently marred by polio. Because of the Salk vaccine, that will never be true again. Some tragedy is the result of human limitation.

3) Some tragedy is the result of human irresponsibility and wickedness.

Has there ever been a more vivid demonstration of this than what happened in this nation on Tuesday? I think I am a mature adult, but I am continually shocked by the human capacity for evil. Do not tell me that demonic powers are not at work in our world through the souls of human beings.

It is not just the horrors of this past Tuesday, as you well know. The media bring to us daily endless accounts of outrageous cruelty. We constantly witness the suffering of children and other innocents at the hands of incomprehensible evil. Much tragedy results from the dark side of the human heart and the deadly misuse of Human freedom.

We must be honest and realistic about these things, I think. Tragedy comes through statistical probability, human limitations, and simple wickedness.

How, then, can we speak of providence? What has all of this to do with the will of God?

In my little cubicle that summer, I was thrown back time after time from the eloquent words and elaborate systems of the theologians, which may not help much when the crisis comes, no matter how profound they are, to the only answer God seems to have given. The cross.

It seems to me that none of the traditional answers to our *"Why?"* questions take the cross into consideration. We have never liked having to look at the cross. But it

won't be dismissed, and cannot be explained away. We think it somehow represents what God wanted all along. The cross, however, is what God did *not* want, but chose anyway.

The cross tells me that God honors human freedom. It says that God allows statistical probability, our limitations, and our wickedness. There is no freedom if these things are not real.

It also tells me, however, that in the very places where human freedom is abused, in the most tragic situations, the divine will is at work. God's will does not prevent tragedy, but transforms it. The cross becomes, not a symbol of tragedy, but the supreme symbol of victory. Death is transformed into life.

This is what Paul Tillich meant when he said that in every situation there is a "*saving possibility*." God's will means that the destructive power of evil can never have an unbreakable hold on us. This is what Karl Barth meant, when very old and seriously ill, in a personal letter he wrote saying that the "bacillus" might enter his kidneys, which would mean his end, but that the "bacillus" could not destroy the kingdom of his God. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he claimed that nothing can separate us from the love of God. And I think this must be what Oscar Wilde meant when he wrote in *De Profundis*, "*Where there is tragedy, there is holy ground.*"

Joseph stands before his brothers and says, "*You intended evil, but God turned it into good.*" No, Joseph, statistical probability sent you to Egypt, human limitation, your brothers' wickedness. Joseph says to us: "*I have found the healing dimension of all this. I have seen that God is at work where God seems to be hidden.*"

I have tried to point out this morning the crucial difference between speaking of what God *causes* and speaking of what God does not cause but *uses* in the service of love. I have wanted to speak of what Paul Scherer and Paul the Apostle call "*the pain God is allowed to guide.*"

The late American theologian Nels Ferre has always been helpful to me in my musings on providence. A student of his came to resent his teacher's unrelenting emphasis on the love of God, which was the cornerstone of Ferre's theology. This student, you see, was daily going from a hospital in the city to the seminary, then back to the hospital. His little child was dying of leukemia. He would come from watching the child's agony and burn with hostility in the classroom as this idealistic, ivory-towered professor spoke of the love of God. It was all he could do to refrain from standing and challenging everything he was hearing.

On the night the child died, the student related later, the first person that came to him and his wife was Dr. Ferre. Putting his arms around the grieving couple, he elucidated his teaching on the love of God. He said, "*I have come tonight to say to you that God is hurting as much as you are.*"

It is the God of the cross, this suffering God of love, who makes it possible for people of faith to utter out of some dark night and lonely valley their strange doxologies of praise...and hope.