

Accepting Adversity and Tragedy

Lesson 8 Tragedy and Adversity Among Loved Ones

Introduction

In the previous lesson, we began our consideration of tragedies closer to home, situations where our friends or family are in need. In this lesson we will note that some benefits can be derived, even from situations where our loved ones are in pain or suffering. Nevertheless, God makes it clear - it is appropriate to do all that we can to avoid pain and to relieve the suffering of those whom we love. But in addition to relief, what we are often seeking are answers, and we will consider here the answers that are available to address our questions about the adversities faced by those we love.

Paradox of Pain

The title of this class is Accepting Adversity and Tragedy. Does this title imply that we are simply to accept whatever happens to us in life without struggling against it? Does acceptance mean that we should do nothing? Is God displeased by our efforts to improve our condition or the conditions of those we love? These are important questions because the Scriptures teach that good things can result from difficult times (James 1:2-4), and we might draw the conclusion that we should not avoid any pain or trial. It is comforting, therefore, to examine the many examples in the Bible where individuals were approved in their efforts to help loved ones. We have already looked at several accounts of this nature:

1. Paralyzed Man Helped by Friends Mark 2:1-12
 - a. Describe the effort of the friends:

 - b. What did Jesus say about the friends?

 - c. What did Jesus do for the paralyzed man?

2. Daughter of Syro-Phoenician Woman Matthew 15:21-28

3. Also look at:
 - a. Centurions's Servant Matthew 8:5-13

 - b. The Church in Jerusalem's Prayer for Peter Acts 12:5, 12

You can also see the approval of Jesus toward those who sought to help themselves (Mark 5:24-34, Mark 10:46-52). He frequently tested their faith, but never rebuked them for seeking to be healed.

Failure to Find Relief

But accompanying our effort must also be the recognition that we will not always receive what we desire. Our prayers may not be answered as we wish. Remember David who fasted, wept and prayed on behalf of his dying child (II Samuel 12:16-17, 21), but still the child died. David even understood that it was the specific will of God that the child should die (II Samuel 12:14); yet he accepted God's will, his immediate response being to worship God (II Samuel 12:20-23).

Most of us do not have the faith of a David. We want to know why our loved ones are suffering, why they are facing trials and adversities. We want to know why God has not responded to our prayers and relieved their pain or prolonged their lives.

Answers

There are situations when we have an answer, or at least a partial understanding, as to why a tragedy has occurred to someone we love.

1. They may suffer because of their own sins. Their sickness may be the result of alcohol or drug abuse. A life of immoderation or of smoking may have caused irreparable harm. Infidelity may have destroyed their marriage; sloth may cost them a job. Unfortunately, there are some consequences in life that even repentance will not change (cf. Hebrews 12:16-17, I Samuel 15:24-28). Having this knowledge of the cause of someone's suffering will not diminish our love for them, nor should we cease to be compassionate. It does, however, make it easier to accept the reality of their pain without a danger to our faith.
2. They may suffer because of the sins of others. This is the situation of my nephew, Jason Swann. Jason was nineteen when a drunken driver struck the car he was driving. He was thrown from the vehicle and sustained injuries that will affect the quality of his life, to one degree or another, for the rest of his days. In such circumstances, many will still question a God who allows this to happen or ponder the purpose that is to be served by it. But it also possible to place the blame where it truly lies: on a wicked individual who made bad choices as influenced by a being (Satan) who sought not only his or her harm, but the harm of others as well, both physically and to their faith.

But we know that every sickness or tragedy does not conveniently fall into a category where we can blame a specific person. Remember John 9:1-3 where the disciples saw a man born blind and immediately wanted to know who was at fault: the man (an interesting concept) or his parents. Jesus answered that it was neither. What are we to do when the answers above don't apply, and we have no one to blame?

Partial Answers and No Answers

Let's begin by carefully considering two passages:

1. I Thessalonians 4:13-14
 - a. What did Paul say he did not want the Thessalonians to be (vs. 13)? Isn't that a blessing!
 - b. How were they not to grieve? Why?
2. I Peter 2:12

- a. What may those who speak against us, ultimately do?
- b. Does this imply that they are watching our behavior for inconsistencies with our proclaimed faith? Is there an application here to how we should act when we are grieved?

The fact is that the world is watching us, and God expects our conduct to be different from the rest of the world's (Matthew 5:14-16). This may especially be the case when our response to a loved one's problems is clearly on display. There are opportunities that can be used, and perhaps even benefits to be gained, in such moments. At least three come to mind:

- A. We can be taught again that this world is flawed. What can help us see more clearly the fallen nature of this world than the suffering of someone we love? This is not a benefit we would ever seek because it is drawn from another person's pain, but, nevertheless, we should recognize this fact every time a loved one is stricken.
- B. Similar to the point above, we can have our focus drawn toward heaven and what lies beyond this life. This appears to be what Paul did with his own suffering (II Corinthians 4:16 – 5:10). As hard as tragedies are to accept, to those walking by faith rather than by sight, they turn our attention to heaven.
- C. It gives us a chance to provide some answers to others (i.e. to our stricken loved ones and to those who observe our faith in regard to their suffering). We know we are to be prepared to give an answer to those who ask, but remember what we answering to is our hope (I Peter 3:15). Our peace in the face of adversity will produce questions by those who lack such faith.

Yet still, there are those situations where we search and find no answers. Where we see no opportunities and find little benefits to us spiritually. This is the time to strive to trust God. It is the time to be reminded of God's goodness and unquestionable concern for us. A futile search for God's reasoning or purpose in allowing a loved one to suffer will only harm us and in turn prevent us from providing hope to the one suffering. This is not what we want to hear, but it reflects what we know of God:

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are my ways your ways, declares 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"*

Isaiah 55:8-9