

## Questions in the Face of Tragedy

The first message appeared on Monday, April 16, 2007 at 10:44 a.m. less than an hour after the shootings on the campus of Virginia Tech. News had just broken, and a concerned friend posted a simple request to Lauren's MySpace page. "Please call me ASAP. I'm worried about you with all the news I heard this morning." Lauren McCain was a twenty-year-old International Studies major at Virginia Tech.

Two more hours went by and no one had yet heard from Lauren. A second message is posted at 1:24 p.m. It simply pleads, "Call your parents ASAP." Several more hours pass with only silence. At 7:44 p.m. her cousin James posts another message, "Hey lil' Cuz. Give us a call and let us know that you are all right. We are worried about you."

Family and friends begin gathering at Lauren's home church in Hampton, VA to support and encourage one another. They wait, hoping for a miracle. One by one, other families receive the heartbreaking news that their child is among the dead, but the McCain family hears nothing.

Lauren's parents leave for Blacksburg by Monday night. Everyone else stays at the church for an overnight prayer vigil. Just after noon on Tuesday, a cell phone rings on the back pew, and a hush falls upon the room. The medical examiner would be meeting with the parents at 1:00.

Their pastor, David Bounds leads the group in prayer. Various friends and family stood and shared thoughts and stories about Lauren. They read Bible verses, and they prayed, some bowing, some kneeling, and some even lying prone on the floor.

The next call came at 2:02. Pastor Bounds informs the gathering, "The word that I just got is that they're 95% sure that it is Lauren." Muffled sobs turn into screams and wailing. In another 25 minutes, it is official.

At this point, the messages on Lauren's MySpace page take a dramatic turn. They are filled with the outpouring of grief and condolences. One left Tuesday evening at 6:57 says, "*You inspired so many because you lived like a real Christian. Your impact on so many lives, including my own, is astounding. You really loved God and now you can finally dance before Him. I love you, Lauren.*"

The last message left on Wednesday, April 18 says, *“Lauren, RIP and may all your questions be answered. And we know you have a lot of 'em!”*

Questions. Tragedy brings out a lot of them. Even Christians struggle with these questions. Lauren may have all of her answers now, but her family and her friends and so many others on this side of eternity are still wrestling with the question marks, and answers seem few and far between. In the aftermath of the tragedies such as the shootings at Virginia Tech or at the theater in Aurora Colorado, or a radical Muslim opens fire on a Marine recruiting center, we ask difficult questions.

If God is really good and if he is really all-powerful, then why doesn't he intervene all the time? Why didn't he stop the shooter? Why didn't he guide the tornado through an empty field instead of the middle of Joplin? Why does he stop some tragedies, but not all? Why does he answer some prayers, but not mine, not this one? We want to know “Where is God in all of this?”

Scripture answers this question from three different perspectives: the past, the present, and the future. It talks about what God has done about evil, what he is doing now about evil, and what he will do? It will make the most sense if we start in the future in work our way backwards.

#### **A. Future**

Sometimes we wonder why God doesn't act and do something about the problem of evil. Why does he allow evil to continue? Why doesn't he just wipe it out? Scripture teaches us that one day, he will wipe it out. A day is coming when God will get rid of all evil, and every effect of sin. Acts 17:21 tells us, “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.” Justice is the idea of setting everything right. There will be a day when Jesus returns and every vestige of evil will be dealt with justly. Every wrong will be righted.

That all sounds well and good, but when we witness tragedy whether it's a mass shooting or a more individual calamity we demand to know why he doesn't do it NOW. Here's the catch. God COULD get rid of all evil. He COULD wipe out every source of tragedy and suffering. He could do that right now, today. But to get rid of those things he has to rid the

world of the CAUSE of those things. And that brings us back to what I said earlier - we live in a sinful world where sinful people do sinful things. To get rid of sin, God would have to get rid of sinners. But we're all sinners.

Are we ready to answer for every sinful thing we've ever done? Are we ready to give an accounting for every cruel word, every selfish neglect, every violent act? A doctor can't get rid of the cancer without killing the cancer cells. God can't get rid of sin without getting rid of sinners. There are only two ways for him to get rid of sinners, and that is to judge them and condemn them and wipe them out from his presence forever, or he has to somehow take their sin and their guilt away from them, so that they are no longer sinners. If God is to deal with sin, he must deal with me. He must deal with you. Are you ready for that?

That's what Jesus is all about. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." I like how Eugene Peterson spins this verse in his paraphrase, "*God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining himself on account of you, holding back the End because he doesn't want anyone lost. He's giving everyone space and time to change.*"

You see, God wants to deal with the sin, but he also wants to save the sinner. So, while God gives sinners time to be saved, sinners continue doing sinful things. So does that mean that in the meantime, while we wait for Jesus to return, we are simply helpless and hopeless when it comes to evil and tragedy? By no means. That brings us to the present perspective.

## **B. Present**

In Luke 13, Jesus was asked about a tragedy that had occurred in his day. Pontius Pilate massacred a bunch of Galileans at the temple and then mixed their blood with the sacrifices on the altar. Luke doesn't quote their question, but from Jesus' answer we know it was something along the lines of, "What did they do to deserve that?"

The answer that Jesus gives, and ultimately the Bible gives isn't comfortable or convenient, but it is a truth we need to know. We live in a sinful world where sinful people do sinful things. God didn't make the world this way. God didn't bring sin and all of its consequences into the world. We're the ones that brought sin into the world. Jesus says in Luke 13 that the truth is that we all deserve to perish. We're all guilty, Jesus says. The amazing thing

isn't that tragedy sometimes strikes some people. The amazing thing is that it doesn't strike all of us instantly. If we all got what we deserved, we would all perish in an instant.

The fact is that because of his love for us, God is constantly intervening so that we could live another day, and breathe another breath. We have no way of knowing of the countless tragedies that could have and should have occurred, but didn't because God intervened. Sometimes we get a hint of it. Have you ever had a narrow miss, and you realized that had you been just a half second sooner or later, you'd be dead. Somehow, God never gets the credit when we wake up another day or take another breath. He only gets the blame when we don't

Scripture teaches that not only did God create the world, but through Jesus, He continues to sustain creation. Colossians 1:17 says, "in him all things hold together." Hebrews 1:3 says that He sustains all things by his powerful word. The world in which we live would collapse under the weight of our sin, if God didn't keep it together. Every moment, He is sustaining creation, holding it together. In Romans 8, Paul says that all creation groans under the weight of sin and suffering, and that it eagerly awaits the day when God will make everything new.

That doesn't lessen the pain of the tragedy we do experience, but we do need to remember it would be a lot worse except for the grace and intervention of God. Scripture does tell us that God is able to work through the pain and tragedy we experience to accomplish greater good. Many of us have found comfort in the promise of Romans 8:28, "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*"

The greatest picture of this comes in the Old Testament in the book of Genesis. In Jealousy and anger Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. This was a horrific act of evil, but God worked through it. Over the course of several years, Joseph was able to gain the trust of important officials in Egypt. He was entrusted with great responsibilities, eventually reaching the point where he was second only to Pharaoh. Through Joseph's leadership the entire nation was saved from a famine, and the people from many surrounding nations also turned to Egypt for help, including Joseph's brothers. Because of Joseph, his family was spared from certain doom.

In forgiving his brothers, Joseph offers this insightful explanation, *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."* What you meant for evil. God meant for good. Joseph recognized that there were two plans at work. Satan is at work in this world with a plan of sin and evil, but God is at work with an even greater plan, that can accomplish more good from a sinful act than the evil it brings. I would never want to belittle the suffering or loss of Loren McCain's family, but is it possible that through the thousands of lives that were touched through the witness of Loren McCain in her death, lives that she never would have touched in life, that God might be able to do far more good than the evil done by Seung Hui Cho? Again, these are the sorts of things we should never say to someone in the midst of tragedy, but they are truths we need to arm ourselves with, during life's tranquil moments.

That way, whenever suffering or tragedy does touch our life, we can remember that a greater plan is also at work. We might not see it. We might not ever get to see the results, but we know from numerous times in history that God does bring greater good out of evil things we do. Esther chosen to marry an evil king, as a result she saved all of her people. Daniel is taken into captivity and forced into the service of the king. As a result he influences an entire empire for good. Paul is arrested because of a conspiracy of Jewish religious leaders, and he is able to preach the gospel before the most powerful people in the world, and the Roman government funds taking the gospel to the center of the empire. Five missionaries are killed trying to bring the gospel to the violent Wadoni tribe in Ecuador. As a result, a grieving widow in an act of grace and forgiveness is able to reach the entire tribe. A young lady is shot to death in a college classroom, and her faith is put on display in such a way that it is witnessed by millions.

### **C. The Past**

However, God's greatest response to suffering occurred in the past. It happened when he sent his own Son as one of us, to live as one of us, to experience our suffering and our pain and our loss as one of us. God entered this world in our flesh, and felt for himself what our world is like. As Philip Yancey points out in his book, *Where is God When it Hurts*, God is not deaf to our pain. Not only does he hear it,

*but he took on ears, literal eardrum-ossicle-cochlea human ears. On the cracked and dusty plains of Palestine, God's Son heard firsthand the molecular vibrations of human*

*groans; from the sick and the needy, and from others who who groaned more from guilt than from pain.*

As one of us, Jesus knew the pain of human tragedy first hand. He cried at the funeral of a friend. He wept over the city of Jerusalem. God is not unmoved by tragedy. His tears mingle with our own.

But his greatest response to human evil is the cross. He willingly took all of our pain and suffering and tragedy upon himself. He took the full brunt of our evil on the cross. Every sin, every act of evil, every horrific thing ever said or done, Jesus nailed it to the cross. Paul tells us in Colossians 2:13-15:

*You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.*

God responded to our evil by taking it upon himself. He took our sin, so that we could be healed of our sin, rescued from our evil. God willingly received the greatest tragedy ever. He was the most innocent, most undeserving person to suffer, and he did so that we could be saved. What is God's response to evil? We have to look no further than the cross of Jesus Christ for the answer.

God responded definitively in the past. He continues to respond in the present as he furthers a greater plan, and he will respond ultimately in the future.

### **What Are we to Do?**

But what is our response to evil? What are we to do? Now there's two ways we could answer this question. The first is how do we respond when tragedy personally touches our own lives? How do we persevere when we find ourselves in midst of loss and suffering? That would take a whole separate sermon, and I don't have time to answer it sufficiently here.

The second is how do we as Christians and as a church respond when the world experiences tragedy? What is our response when our neighbor, our community, our country experiences tragedy?

The answer is found in Romans 12 where Paul calls us to overcome evil with good.

Rom 12:14-21

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:*

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;*

*if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.*

*In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

As long as the church is present on earth, evil does not have free reign. We are here as an instrument of God's love and grace. The more we live our Christian witness, the greater influence of the gospel, and the more active the church the less elbow room the devil has to do his work. No, we don't have the power to completely defeat evil ourselves, but we can keep it in check; we can show that there is a power greater than evil. One godly person has greater power than a thousand people with evil in their hearts.

When Christians love the lonely, when we care for sick, when we remember the forgotten, when we comfort the hurting, when we help the helpless, when we feed the hungry we show that evil can be overcome. We are the greatest evidence of the love of God. In the midst of tragedy, people will know that God cares and that God loves, because we care and we love. We are the hands and feet of God's love.

When they see that God's love is real in our lives, then they'll want to know God for themselves. Then they can know that sin is a defeated enemy. They will know that death will not have the last word. They will know the hope of eternal life. They will know him who is perfect, and pure and holy, and good in every way. Then they will be able to say just as Lauren McCain wrote on her MySpace page: "The purpose and love of my life is Jesus Christ. I don't have to argue religion, philosophy, or historical evidence because I KNOW Him. He is just as real, if not more so, as my 'earthly' father." A short time before the shooting Lauren wrote to her friend Amy, "I can only imagine ... how wonderful heaven will be." This morning Lauren no longer has to imagine. Do you know that same hope? Do you have that same assurance in your heart no matter what comes your way? You can.