

When Tragedy Strikes!

Franklin Church of Christ
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AM Worship

Introduction:

Tuesday, September 11, 2001—four years ago today: This date will forever be engraved in that part of our mind that stores information we wish we could forget but cannot. Pearl Harbor, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger and the Oklahoma City bombing. I was in ninth grade returning from the high school band hall when I learned of the Challenger Explosion. Marita and I were visiting a small church in middle Tennessee on Wednesday evening during our honeymoon when we were told about the Oklahoma City bombing. On 9-11, I had left the Early Bird Café in Beaumont, Texas, where I had picked up a cup of coffee, and was traveling down Phelan Blvd. when I heard the radio announcer say between songs that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center. I thought, “Oh No! Some air traffic controller is going to be in big trouble.” Moments later, as I was about to turn on to Dowlen Road, Elton John’s Bennie and the Jets was interrupted and the DJ announced that a second plane had flown into the second of the Twin Towers. I thought, “Oh No! This was no air traffic controller mistake.” A few moments later, in my office, I called one of my elders at the time, David Rogers, and he mentioned he had just seen something about the Pentagon. I thought, “Great, now the rumors of full scale attack are beginning.” Then, on the television, I learned it was not a rumor. I thought, “Oh No! What is going to happen next?” The rest was a mixture of shock, sorrow, fear and anger. Not only do we remember the horrors of 9-11, even now four years later, we are in the midst of the aftermath of the numerous tragedies surrounding the most recent hurricane to ravage the Gulf Coast, Katrina. Whether we are remembering 9-11, suffering from Katrina or facing our own personal tragedy, there are lessons we must learn regarding how to handle it when tragedy strikes.

Discussion:

- I. God may not have planned this, but He will use it.
 - A. In the many funerals surrounding 9-11 and in those that will surround Katrina, I am sure preachers have “comforted” the grieving by saying, “We don’t know why God chose to end so many lives so tragically, let us trust God’s plan. He knows best.”
 - B. We must trust God and He does know best. But the events of 9-11 and Katrina were not necessarily instigated by God. The Bible is quite clear that God has created a world in which He is not the only acting force.
 1. No doubt, God is an active force in the world. He is not, as some suppose, simply watching the world unfold. Passages such as **Romans 8:28**; **I Corinthians 3:6-7** and **I Peter 1:4-5** all demonstrate God is active in our world. Is it possible that this is part of God’s judgment on a nation that is becoming more and more decadent and sinful? Of course. But without scripture declaring such to be the case, we cannot lay this act directly at God’s feet.
 2. The Bible is also clear that God has given Satan freedom to act. **I Thessalonians 2:18**; **II Corinthians 12:7** and **I Peter 5:8** all clearly demonstrate Satan’s presence and activity.
 3. God has created a world wherein man has a free will that affects the direction of our world and sometimes even God’s action. **Jeremiah 18:5-12** demonstrates this. God may promise a certain action, but if men change their course, God will change His response.
 4. Finally, the Bible also speaks of the working of time and chance (**Ecclesiastes 9:11**).
 - C. In all Biblical honesty, we must notice God’s own words in **Job 2:3**. While we know Satan was the direct cause of Job’s suffering, God said He had Himself been incited against Job. Nothing can be accomplished in this world whether by Satan, man’s free will or time and chance except God has permitted it. In that sense, and that sense alone, can all things in the world be attributed to God. We know of one limitation God always maintains on all other forces in the world. According to **I Corinthians 10:13**, God will never allow anything that will force us to sin. Nothing will happen that we cannot overcome and remain faithful to God. Other than that limitation, God allows the other forces to work in the world.
 - D. However, we cannot leave this point without also establishing one major and almost inconceivable fact. Despite God’s permission for Satan, man and time and chance to work in this world, God still has an ultimate plan that no one can overthrow. **Romans 8:28** demonstrates that God causes all things to work together for good. God will not allow even a

tragedy of 9-11 or Katrina magnitude to overthrow His plan. He will weave even these into the tapestry of His ultimate will for mankind. The true biblical comfort is not that God planned and executed 9-11 or Katrina as part of some massive unknown plan. The comfort is that despite Satan's and man's attempts to act and establish their own plans, God's plan will be accomplished and those who love Him will be saved.

II. "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (**Psalm 23**).

- A. Sheep being led through the valleys to the summer ranges on the mountain top tablelands faced numerous dangers: rampaging flooded rivers, avalanches, rockslides, poisonous plants, predators, storms and more. Just so, we are encompassed about by dangers and dread from numerous sources and in many ways. Perhaps the fears we all had surrounding 9-11 and Katrina highlighted our own vulnerability.
- B. But we have one to whom we can turn for comfort: our Shepherd, Jesus Christ (**John 10:14-15**). The rod and staff of the shepherd comfort his sheep. The panic the sheep feel in the face of danger is assuaged by the presence of their armed shepherd. The rod and staff, tools of discipline, protection, inspection, guidance and rescue do not scare the sheep but comfort them. We have this rod and staff in God's word. His word comforts us by protecting us from sin, steering us away from danger, helping us overcome the tempter, drawing us together and closer to God, rescuing us from our own undoing and leading us to heaven when our life is ended. No wonder Paul commended God's word in **Acts 20:32**.
- C. Repeatedly, people have stated that there are no words of comfort in such tragedies. While nothing can be said that causes our emotions to vanish, we, as God's children have great words of comfort. Our Shepherd is with us no matter what happens. **Hebrews 13:5-6** demonstrates such. **Romans 8:31-39** demonstrates that even in the face of warlike attacks or phenomenal acts of nature, we will not be separated from God against our will.
- D. When we see the comfort our Shepherd gives, we recognize the compassion Jesus had for the masses in **Matthew 9:36** when He saw them as sheep without a shepherd, which leads to our next lesson.

III. We must bring the shepherdless sheep into Jesus' fold quickly.

- A. As Jesus looked on the multitudes with compassion, so must we. The majority of Americans have no shepherd. We need to bring them to the Shepherd, before it is their turn to die.
- B. I wonder how many of the people who died on 9-11 and in Katrina had Christian friends who had yet to speak to them about Jesus? How many Christians in those areas are now grieving not only because people have died, but also because some of them were friends or family whom they had yet to tell the gospel? For them, there would always be tomorrow. For them, there were always reasons why "Right now is not the right time." How many of them heard sermons about urgency of preaching the gospel and instead of being pricked in their hearts to talk to friends and family, they raised their own defenses to condemn preachers for challenging them too much? How many of us have done likewise?
- C. If right now is not the right time to point people to the Shepherd, when will it ever be the right time? As **Matthew 9:37-38** says, the harvest is plentiful but we need workers. Actually, we need to be workers. We need to be workers who sow the seed. We need to be workers who water the seed. We need to be workers who bring forth fruit to God's glory, reaping and gathering souls for Christ (**John 15:8**).

IV. Our lives go on, but we look for a better place.

- A. One of my favorite poems is a chilling poem by Robert Frost entitled "Out, Out—" It tells of the death of a young Vermont boy who he cut off his hand while cutting wood. The poem ends with the reaction of his family and co-workers, "And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs."
- B. Following tragedy, our lives go on. We still have to work, eat and sleep. Businesses must be opened. Merchandise must be bought and sold. No matter how close we are to the tragedy we still must continue doing the things that make up our lives. We, since we are not the ones dead, must turn to our own affairs.

- C. But we do so with the reminder that this world is not our home. The thing that helps us turn to our own affairs is recognizing that a world like this one, in which we have to live with such dreadful memories and fears that it will happen again, is not God's plan for eternity. We are looking for a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (**II Peter 3:13**).
- D. We are reminded that our hopes and dreams are not in this world, for even the greatest works of man are only temporary. We are reminded of Jesus' statement in **Matthew 6:19-20**. The things of this earth are destined for decay and destruction. Therefore, we must look for a better place; we must lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven. We comfort one another with the words of **I Thessalonians 4:15-18**.
- E. Do you remember in **Luke 13:1-5** how Jesus responded when men brought up to Him tragedies of His day? "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Jesus was not claiming those tragedies were of necessity God's specific judgment on the people involved, anymore than we can claim our tragedies are God's judgment. The point is, we are all going to perish. Unless we repent of our sins, our perishing will also be a tragedy. Today, our lives may go on. But we must look for the new heaven and new earth. We must prepare for our own demise and death, lest our deaths be as tragic spiritually as 9-11 was nationally.

Conclusion:

If there is any other lesson we learn from these tragedies, it is that none of us are immune from death at any time. **Ecclesiastes 9:12** demonstrates the unknown and sudden nature in which death will overtake us all. We do not have tomorrow. We do not even have the rest of today. This week, men and women died. Black, white, Hispanic and Asian died. Rich and poor died. Educated and ignorant died. Young and old died. Management and labor died. Somebody just like you died this week. You may be next. Are you ready for it?