

Accepting Adversity and Tragedy

Lesson 1

Class Goals and Purpose

Overall Goal

Profound questions deserve profound answers. Too often we expect individuals to be satisfied with short pat answers to their deeply troubled questions about the tragedies and problems of the world. The Bible is a gift from God to mankind. It provides us an opportunity to know things about the world that would otherwise lie beyond human understanding. We should search it carefully and look to it for guidance whenever we come face to face with that which is the most difficult and puzzling.

This class will attempt to deal with the tragedies and adversities of life and try to give more than superficial answers to the questions they provoke. The ultimate goal of the class is to find Biblical, and thus God-given, answers wherever they are provided. But before we begin, we must recognize that a full or satisfactory answer may not exist to all of the questions that we pose. While it is perfectly natural to have questions, and clearly God's desire is for us to look to His word for answers, it is equally important that we be able to accept those circumstances where no answer is provided.

The Bible is full of examples of this principle, the best known, of course, being Job. Job was befallen with personal tragedies beyond what any of us have faced, and he questioned God seeking answers. He received none, but when God spoke to him, He simply reminded Job of His might and power (Job 38:1 ff).

Questions

With those principles in mind, we turn to a list of questions that are frequently asked when tragedies and adversities are faced:

1. Why is there suffering in the world?
2. Why did God create humans but allow them to suffer and eventually die?
3. Why must I grow old?
4. Why are some individuals so cruel and why does God allow it?
5. Why are some people blessed with material goods and others have nearly nothing?
6. Why did God allow (fill-in the natural disaster) to happen?
7. Why was (name of a loved one) stricken with (fill-in a disease or accident)?
8. Why are there wars and will they ever stop?
9. Why was my prayer for (a tragedy to stop or not happen) not answered?
10. What should I say to someone in grief or pain?
11. How do I deal with the grief over a loved one's lost soul?

12. Does God providentially prevent some deaths or illnesses? If so, why some and not others?
13. Does God determine the timing of death or illness, or does He allow some things to occur naturally?

Individuals in the Bible asked tough questions about life, about God, and about adversity. Read the following:

- Job 23:1-7
- Habakkuk 1:2-4, 13
- Judges 6:13
- Ecclesiastes 1:3, 13
- Psalms 74:1, 10-11
- John 9:1-2
- Psalms 8:3-4

One tendency that we will note throughout the class is that the more generic and broad the question, the greater the likelihood that there is a Bible answer. For example, the Bible really does explain why there is death and disease in the world. The more personal and detailed the question (e.g. why do I have cancer?) the less likely that there will be a fully satisfactory answer. However, it is also true that these are the questions we most intently want answered.

Overview of the Class

Our approach in this class will be as follows:

Lessons	Date	Contents
Lesson 1	Sunday, Feb. 22	Class Goals and Purpose
<i>Lessons 2 - 3</i>		<i>Establishing a Firm Foundation</i>
Lesson 2	Wed., Feb. 25	Dangers to Our Faith – A Study of Psalms 73
Lesson 3	Sunday, March 1	Listening to God
<i>Lessons 4 - 6</i>		<i>Dealing with Large Scale Tragedies</i>
Lesson 4	Wed., March 4	Basic Considerations
Lesson 5	Sunday, March 8	Answers in a Fallen World
Lesson 6	Wed., March 11	Further Answers in a Fallen World
<i>Lessons 7 - 8</i>		<i>Dealing with Tragedies Among Loved Ones</i>
Lesson 7	Sunday, Mar. 15	Biblical Examples and Related Spiritual Dangers
Lesson 8	Wed., March 18	Paradox of Pain and Accepting God's Answers
<i>Lessons 9 - 10</i>		<i>Personal Suffering and Trials</i>
Lesson 9	Sunday, Mar. 22	Biblical Examples, Value of Trials
Lesson 10	Sunday, April 1	Accepting God's Plan
<i>Lessons 11 - 13</i>		<i>Roles of Prayer and Hope</i>
Lesson 11	Wed., April 4	When and How to Pray
Lesson 12	Sunday, April 8	Accepting No as an Answer
Lesson 13	Wed. April 11	Hope, the Ultimate Answer

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Lesson 2

Dangers to Our Faith – A Study of Psalms 73

Background and Review

In lesson 1 we listed and discussed a series of difficult questions that are often asked as we face the inequities of life and the adversities and tragedies that often result. For the most part, these questions are appropriate ones; often questions that come naturally to mind as we contemplate a seemingly meaningless tragedy. But these questions are also dangerous to our souls if they cause us to begin to question the goodness and care of God.

In his book, When God Doesn't Make Sense, Dr. James Dobson notes a process of questioning God by believers that leads all too close to a point he calls the Betrayal Barrier. When a crisis comes and our prayers are not granted, Dobson describes the process *“in a matter of moments the world can fall off its axis. Panic stalks the soul as life and death hang in the balance. A pounding heart betrays the anxiety within. ‘But where is God? Does He know what is happening? Is He concerned? Why have the heavens grown dark and silent?’ Then as frustration and fear accumulate, the human spirit recoils in distrust and confusion.”*

Warren W. Wiersbe put it this way in Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People, *“It isn't the normal demands of life that break us; it's the painful surprises. I'm not talking about 'reaping what we sow', because most of us are smart enough to know when and why that happens. When life hands us these painful surprises, we start to ask questions. We wonder if we've been cheated. We begin to doubt that life makes any sense at all. Bad things do happen to God's people; and when these bad things happen, our normal response is to ask, 'Why us?'"*

As Christians we must prepare ourselves in advance for the tests of our faith. In the end, as hard as it is to understand at times, nothing is more tragic than the loss of our faith.

To begin our study of how to deal with pain and adversity and the questions that ensue, we will examine Psalms 73. In this Psalm, Asaph the Psalmist raises many of the concerns that we will examine throughout this class.

Psalm 73

Asaph was a man who questioned God and appears to have had his faith nearly shattered. But he also came to a deeper understanding, one that will help us repeatedly in our study.

1. Casually read the entire Psalm through once and then read it carefully at least one more time.

2. How did Asaph describe his condition at the beginning of this Psalm (vs. 2)?
Note also his description in vs. 21-22.

3. What had he observed that troubled him? Be specific.

4. What doubts were created by his observations (vs. 13-15)?

5. Was he initially able to understand and make sense of this (vs. 16)?

6. What was the turning point in his understanding?

7. What did he come to understand about God and about the wicked?

Emotions or Revelation

Like Asaph, we may find ourselves having nearly slipped, having almost stumbled, but the key is to gain a proper understanding (Psalm 73:18). What is to be the source of this understanding? Where do we turn when confronted with questions we cannot answer? Unfortunately, once a tragedy has occurred, many people rely almost exclusively on their emotions. It is what they feel that drives their conclusions about God and about His fairness or His concern.

I remember the comments of a local woman when the bombing occurred at the Federal Center in Oklahoma City some years ago. She stated her newfound belief that a good God could not exist if he allowed such a tragedy to happen to innocent children (recall that there was a child care center in the destroyed building). Clearly she based this on her emotions of the moment; otherwise she could have easily concluded the same thing from any number of events in history. Innocent children have died at the hands of evil men for as far back as we have recorded history. The Bible acknowledges such events (cf. Matthew 2:16-18). But this tragedy had struck near to home, and in her understandable grief and anguish she had drawn unwarranted conclusions about God.

It is vital that we find the right source of information about God and about His character and His purposes before we find ourselves in the midst of deep sorrow or difficulty. Satan will use such an opportunity to whisper to us that God doesn't care; that He is far away or even that He does not exist. The only reliable source of information about God and the nature of the world He has created is God Himself. Unless He chooses to reveal to us His ways, there are things we will never understand. The Bible is clear on this point, and, in this class, the assumption is made that you have concluded the Bible is a

revelation from God to man. Consider what it says about God and our source of knowledge of Him:

1. Read I Corinthians 2:6-12.
 - a. How is the wisdom of God described (vs. 7)? Who can know it directly (vs. 11)?
 - b. Has God chosen to reveal things about Himself? How?
 - c. Read Ephesians 3:3-5 for the connection between this revelation from the Spirit to man and the Bible.
2. Read Isaiah 55:8-9. How different are the thoughts of God and the thoughts of man?

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in a sermon on Psalms 73 had the following to say about this passage from Isaiah:

“Half our trouble arises from the fact that we do not realize that that is the basic position from which we must always start. I think that many of us get into trouble just because we forget that we are really dealing with the mind of God, and that God’s mind is not like our mind. We desire everything to be cut and dried and simple, and feel that there should never be any problems or difficulties. But if there is one thing that is taught more clearly than anything else in the Bible it is that that is never the case in our dealings with God. The ways of God are inscrutable; his mind is infinite and eternal, and his purposes are so great that our sinful minds cannot understand. Therefore, when such a Being is dealing with us, it ought not to surprise us if, at times, things take place which are perplexing to us.”

But we must be careful when we are perplexed that our perplexity does not lead to despair and sin. So we will examine in our next lesson what the Bible has to say about the character of God. We must establish a true picture of God as He has allowed us to understand Him. Such an understanding will serve us well when we find that we cannot answer all of the difficult questions of life, because we will still have confidence in God and may even come (as we should) to accept His will when He is silent, and no answers are to be found.

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Lesson 3

Listening to God

Introduction and Review

In the previous lessons we established the need for dependence on revelation from God to give us true insight into His character and His plans. In a moment of crisis, all too often we lean on our emotions to form our opinions about the goodness of God. This explains why it is so important to go to God's revelation - the Bible - in times when we are not tested, to establish as deeply as possible, a true picture of God and His abiding care for us.

Gift of Christ

If we ever come to fully appreciate what God did in the sending of His Son to die for us, we will never question God's love for us. There are so many passages that could be examined in this light but we will look at only a few:

1. Degree to Which We Deserved Christ's Sacrifice
 - a. Read Romans 5:6-11.
 - i. What are three words used to describe us (vs. 6, 8, 10)?
 - ii. With each description, what is God said to have done?
 - iii. How does this action of God compare to what might be expected in our actions toward one another?
2. Degree to Which We Needed Christ's Sacrifice
 - a. We are familiar with the passages that explain all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) and that the wages, i.e. the just reward of sinners, is death (Romans 6:23a), but read on in each passage. What has God done for us in Christ?
 - b. Note the description given of our condition without Christ in the following passages:
 - i. Ephesians 2:1-3 (again read on another verse or two).
 - ii. Ephesians 4:17-19
3. Degree of Christ's Suffering
 - a. Begin with the account of Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and read through to His death on the cross (e.g. Mark 14:32 – 15:41).
 - b. Read Hebrews 5:6-8.

- c. Carefully meditate on what this suffering was really like for God the Son who owed us nothing.
4. Abiding Benefits
 - a. Besides being the act of atonement that provides for our forgiveness, note what else the gift of Christ accomplishes:
 - i. Hebrews 2:17-18
 - ii. Hebrews 4:14-16

Constant Concern

From beginning to the end, the Bible describes a God who cares for His people. Please take the time to read through the following passages. When finished, consider the total weight of these scriptures and the fact that they are but a small sample of similar verses throughout the Bible:

1. Isaiah 41:10
2. Psalms 55:22
3. Psalms 138:3
4. Matthew 11:28-30
5. I Timothy 6:17b
6. Hebrews 13:5-6
7. James 1:16-17

Spiritual Blessings

As we will note below and in subsequent lessons, the world that really matters is not the physical one that we can touch and feel, but a spiritual realm that we understand by faith (II Corinthians 4:18, 5:7). God is a God who has given us everything we need spiritually:

1. Read carefully Ephesians 1:3-14
2. II Timothy 3:16-17

Eternal Life

We will come back to this theme repeatedly in this class, regardless of the hardships and sorrows endured in this life, God promises His children an abundant, eternal life in His presence. Clinging to this promise not only assures us of the goodness of God, it gives us the hope necessary to accept adversity and tragedy, and not allow them to overcome our faith. Once more, we have so many passages to choose from:

1. Hebrews 2:10-15. What did Christ overcome?
2. I Corinthians 15:50-57. What will we put on? To whom belongs the credit?
3. Revelations 21:3-5. Contrast life eternal to sorrows and tragedies.

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Lesson 4 Large Scale Tragedies Basic Considerations

Introduction

Having laid a foundation in the previous lessons, it is time to begin an examination of some of the hard questions of life noted in lesson 1. What are we to think when a natural disaster occurs halfway around the world: an earthquake in Iran that kills tens of thousands or a typhoon in Southeast Asia that kills hundreds? Does it make a different impact on us when the tragedy strikes closer to home, say a hurricane on the Florida coast? What if the tragedy is man-made, whether an accident (a nightclub fire sparked by fireworks) or intentional (World Trade Center collapses)?

Whether the tragedy is described as a natural or man-made disaster; questions still arise about the role of God. Could He have prevented the tragedy, and if so, why did He not? The inclination of so many is to blame God. How does a Christian respond to the questions that arise in his or her heart, and how does he or she provide answers to unbelievers who doubt the goodness of God? We will examine these questions and others over the next three lessons.

A Biblical Topic?

Before we get too deep in a consideration of this topic, we need to be sure that it is one addressed in the scriptures. Remember the need to depend upon a revelation from God to provide answers to questions of this nature rather than our own emotions. And indeed, this subject is addressed.

1. Read Luke 13:1-5. What two tragedies are mentioned by Jesus?
2. Were these tragedies man-made or did they occur naturally? If man-made, were they intentional or accidental?
3. We will study the specific lesson that Jesus teaches from these tragedies later, but for now consider this question: was an opinion already held about the tragedies? Did Jesus agree or disagree with the opinion?

Facts of a Fallen World

Much of the misunderstanding about large-scale tragedies and God's role derives from a failure to understand some of the basic facts regarding the nature of the world we live in. We live in a fallen world, one that is flawed and not as God designed it to be originally. By a fallen world we mean one in which man has fallen from the position of a relationship with God untainted by sin. The story of man's fall is found in Genesis 3.

1. Read Genesis 3:1-24.
2. Consider carefully the actions of Eve, Adam and the serpent (Satan).

There are a number of important facts in this account that will matter throughout our entire study:

- A. A being exists (Satan) who is endeavoring by every means possible to seek the harm of mankind:
 1. He lied to Eve about the intentions and goodness of God
 2. Read I Peter 5:8 and John 8:44. What is said of Satan?
- B. God desires the loyal service of men and women, but He will not force them to obey. He allows us the free will choice of obedience or rebellion
 1. We are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27)
 2. Before the fall, God gave Adam and Eve the ability to decide whether to obey or not (Genesis 2:16-17).
 3. After the fall, they knew the difference between good and evil and had the ability to make choices (Genesis 3:22).
- C. The consequences of sin are dire.
 1. An ideal world was changed into one of thorns and thistles and man was condemned to a life of hardship (Genesis 3:17-19a)
 2. Woman was given sorrow and pain (Genesis 3:16)
 3. Death was introduced and along with it undoubtedly the various means of death: disease, accidents, and natural disasters (Genesis 3:3, 19b)
- D. The world is no longer as God designed it to be, but He has a plan in Christ
 1. The first prophecy of Christ is found here (Genesis 3:15)

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Lesson 5 Large Scale Tragedies Answers in a Fallen World

Introduction

In lesson 4 we considered some of the more important facts regarding the fall of man. In this lesson, we will go a step further and consider some of the implications of these facts as they relate to the tragedies and disasters that occur in life.

Implications of the Fall

Let's look again at the consequences of the Fall for both Satan and mankind.

1. God pronounced that there would be enmity between Satan and Eve (Genesis 3:15). An enmity that would continue for generations to come. Satan has worked ever since to seek the harm of men and women physically and even more so to cost them their souls.

Apparently, there are times when Satan is able to directly damage our physical bodies; at least we know that God permitted him to do so with Job and his family (Job 1:12, 18-19, 2:6-7). But Satan has caused far more damage through the agency of wicked men and women who have been influenced by him to commit every imaginable act of harm to their fellow human beings. C.S. Lewis wrote in The Problem of Pain:

“. . . the possibility of pain is inherent in the very existence of a world where souls can meet. When souls become wicked they will use this possibility to hurt one another; and this, perhaps, accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men. It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs; it is by human avarice or human stupidity, not by the churlishness of nature, that we have poverty and overwork.”

As you contemplate the suffering that exists in the world because of the actions of man, how could someone disagree with this statement? The sinful acts of men and women explain many of the large-scale tragedies that occur in the world, and it is Satan who is behind this harm, not God. Nevertheless, Satan is the one who whispers in the ears of those disturbed by these tragedies that they should doubt the goodness or even existence of God!

2. Despite the harm inflicted by Satan, God will not intervene by preventing man from exercising free will. Without free will, without the ability to make moral choices,

we would be mere robots, programmed to serve God out of necessity and not from the emotions of love and thanksgiving of individuals made in the image of God. Indeed, we could hardly consider ourselves to be in the image of God if we merely served him from instinct not choice. God desires free will agents to follow Him, but such freedom necessitates the ability to choose disobedience and thus wickedness that harms. We may question the wisdom of God in allowing us such freedom, but consider these two questions:

- Do we really prefer the alternative of no free will? Can we imagine a world in which there is no love or kindness shown to anyone freely? Would love, in fact, have any meaning if there were no element of choice?
- Has God merely abandoned us to all of the damage caused by wicked people making wicked choices? Remember Lesson 3 and the multi-faceted concern of God for us. Remember the plan that God has in Christ as first mentioned in Genesis 3:15.

3. Because of the sin of Adam and Eve God changed the nature of the world and thus:

- a. Nature itself is now a place of hardship and difficulty. The door was opened for disease (and thus epidemics), for famines, for weather problems, for earthquakes, and for all the problems associated with man trying to maintain a living through the sweat of his brow.
- b. Death will eventually fall upon every person (Genesis 3:19, Romans 5:12, James 4:14, Hebrews 9:27). We struggle mightily against the very idea of dying, but our bodies and the world in which we live are designed to ultimately bring about death. It is certainly more disturbing when death comes catastrophically, but this is also a feature of the fallen world.
- c. C.S. Lewis pointed out, *“(God) began to rule the organism in a more external way, not by the laws of spirit, but by those of nature. Thus the organs, no longer governed by man’s will, fell under the control of ordinary biochemical laws and suffered whatever the inter-workings of those laws might bring in the way of pain, senility and death”*.

But Why?

Although an understanding of the implications of the Fall will help us understand what makes the world function as it does, we still tend to struggle with the question – “Why?”. Why does God allow it to continue in this way? Why did a specific disaster occur as it did? There are two thoughts to consider in this regard; the second of which will lead us to the next lesson:

- When we dwell on the why, it is a sign that we fail to see what is really at stake. We must look beyond the tragedies and disasters and see God’s

ultimate plan to overcome Satan. We must be able to see God's focus on our individual salvation. This is the reason we laid the foundation of Lesson 3. It is also beneficial to dwell on this thought: would a God who was willing to send His Son to die for us really make life any more difficult than necessary for us to serve Him? God has our best interests at heart.

- Tragedies can serve a useful purpose. Indeed, we will see later that all personal trials and adversities can teach us useful lessons. Large-scale tragedies highlight the fact that something is wrong with the world. They pull at us to look to God for answers and to look at what lies beyond this life. We'll concentrate on this point in the next lesson.

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Lesson 6

Large Scale Tragedies

Further Answers in a Fallen World

Introduction

Look again at the last thought of the previous lesson: large-scale tragedies highlight the fact that something is wrong with the world; not only that the world is flawed, but that it is outside the power of man to fix whatever is wrong. In this lesson we will examine this paradoxical benefit at length and conclude with some final thoughts on large-scale tragedies and disasters.

A Scriptural Lesson

In keeping with the emphasis on using inspired revelation, rather than mere emotions as the source of our understanding, consider the following passages:

1. Read Ecclesiastes 7:14.
 - a) What are we told to do in the day of prosperity? Would this be hard?
 - b) In the day of adversity we are told to consider, i.e. to think and learn a lesson. Why does adversity provide a better opportunity to learn than prosperity?
2. Read Luke 13:1-5.
 - a) We have looked at this passage in lesson 4 to know that it is appropriate to learn from tragedies.
 - b) Does Jesus explain whether God specifically caused the tower to fall or if He allowed Pilate to kill the Galileans in order to teach the Galileans a lesson?
 - c) Who was to learn a lesson from these tragedies?
 - d) What was the lesson?

Jesus made it clear that every person could learn an important lesson from these two tragedies. The key is avoid getting tangled up in series of why? questions and failing to see what God is teaching. Even when the adversity is not our own, we can still consider it and learn the lesson that we need God, that we must repent and draw ourselves near to God.

God's Megaphone

C.S. Lewis was quite pointed about the need for man to pay attention to this lesson. Using the word pain in reference to trials, adversity and tragedies, he said:

"We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities; and anyone who has watched gluttons shovelling down the most exquisite foods as if they did not know what they were eating, will admit that we can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. A bad man, happy, is a man without the least inkling that his actions do not 'answer', that they are not in accord with the laws of the universe".

From The Problem of Pain

Look at this quote and answer the following:

1. Why is it easier to ignore pleasure than pain?
2. How can God wake up a bad person who is happy? Do we see this happening?

Consider how many times in the Old Testament that God brought a tragedy or great trial on an entire nation in order to teach them the lesson of dependence upon Him.

Ten Plagues

Israel on the way to the Promised Land

Cycle of punishment in the book of Judges

Can you think of others?

A Twentieth Century Example

Few centuries could match the twentieth in terms of human destruction and cruelty, the chief example, of course, being the actions of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. The Pianist is the harrowing first person account of Wladyslaw Szpilman, a Jew in Warsaw during World War II. Having survived unspeakable horrors at the hands of the Germans from 1939 to 1945, Szpilman is hiding in the last moments of the war when he is discovered by a German officer named Wilm Hosenfeld. Expecting at last to lose his life, Szpilman is surprised when Hosenfeld not only allows him to continue to hide, but even helps him. After the war, while Szpilman tried unsuccessfully to track down Hosenfeld, he did obtain a copy of his war time diary; excerpts of which are included at the end of The Pianist.

I believe Hosenfeld rightly understood the principle of a flawed world made worse when it turns away from God. In his diary entry for September 1, 1942, Hosenfeld explained the war:

“Why did this war have to happen at all? Because humanity had to be shown where its godlessness was taking it. First of all Bolshevism killed millions, saying it was done to introduce a new world order. But the Bolsheviks could act as they did only because they had turned away from God and Christian teaching. Now National Socialism is doing the same in Germany. It forbids people to practice their religion, the young are brought up godless, the Church is opposed and its property appropriated, anyone who thinks differently is terrorized, the free human nature of the German people is debased and they turn into terrified slaves. The truth is kept from them. They can play no part in the fate of the nation.

There are no commandments now against stealing, killing, or lying, not if they go against people’s personal interest. This denial of God’s commandments leads to all the other immoral manifestations of greed – unjust self-enrichment, hatred, deceit, sexual license resulting in infertility and the downfall of the German people. God allows this to happen, lets these forces have power and allows so many innocent people to perish to show mankind that without him we are only animals in conflict, who believe we have to destroy each other. We will not listen to the divine commandment: ‘Love one another’. Very well, then, says God, try the Devil’s commandment, the opposite: ‘Hate one another’. We know the story of the Deluge from Holy Scriptures. Why did the first race of men come to a tragic end? Because they had abandoned God and must die, guilty and innocent alike. They had only themselves to blame for their punishment. And it is the same today.”

Final Thoughts and Observations

We cannot always know that God has a specific purpose behind a disaster. Who is to say for certain that God is or is not punishing a group of people by a disaster or tragedy? Did a natural disaster simply happen or did God send it for a specific purpose. Man-made disasters, as we have seen, cannot be blamed on God, but He could stop them, so did He have a lesson for someone or not? We should be careful in answering such questions as we remember the misguided views of Job’s friends who believed they knew God’s purpose in Job’s suffering.

Nevertheless while in the specifics we must confess that we don’t know for sure the lesson to be gained, in a general sense we can always hear God’s megaphone. We can conclude that something is wrong and we can’t control it! We need God.

Today, we are so aware of large-scale tragedies through 24 hours of news that a danger may be they fail to wake us up. They fail to teach us as God intends. We don’t always appreciate the human scale in a large tragedy. Our sympathy may be blurred because of the numbers involved. Warren W. Wiersbe commented, *“I may be wrong, but I have a feeling that people react to so-called disasters in a shallow and temporary manner. No sooner is the news flash (of a plane crash) completed than the television viewers go right back to their baseball, perhaps saying, ‘That’s too bad! Think of the people waiting in that Los Angeles airport!’ Few of us will be so upset that we’ll miss a meal or lose any*

sleep; and at coffee break the next day, we'll discuss the plane crash and the baseball game in the same breath."

Christians should not allow this to happen. In addition to our compassion and concern, we must also constantly have reinforced the idea that there is something wrong in the world that only Godly obedience can overcome.

One last benefit can result from large-scale tragedies. What an opportunity it affords us to explain our faith in God and His Son. It is our chance to speak up for God when He is called to task for some tragedy. In I Peter 3:15, we are commanded to make a defense to everyone who asks us for an account of the hope that is within us. Interestingly, the context of the verse is our personal suffering for Christ.

Accepting Adversity and Tragedy

Lesson 7

Tragedy and Adversity Among Loved Ones Biblical Examples and Related Spiritual Dangers

Introduction

We now turn our attention away from large-scale tragedies that may be far from affecting our daily lives and turn towards those situations that affect our family and friends. Here we will consider situations where a loved one is suffering from an illness or from the effects of an accident. Circumstances where old age diminishes the capacity of a loved one to enjoy life or where they are living in constant pain. We will consider the death of a loved one, and in particular where that death seems so tragic because of its suddenness or the youthful age of the deceased.

To a large extent, we have already examined the answers that God provides to help us understand why these situations occur. The answers provided through an understanding of the nature of a fallen world have many applications in a consideration of tragedies among our loved ones. But we must be honest with ourselves. Answers that are accepted when we are considering large-scale tragedies are difficult to cling to when we look at the suffering of a loved one. It is even harder to avoid reacting with mere emotion when adversity or tragedy strikes close to home.

Bible and Real Life

The Bible does not shy away from the difficulties of life. Nearly every problem or adversity that you can imagine was experienced to some degree by someone in the Bible. The travails of loved ones are a key part of many Bible stories. Before we look for the keys to accepting the adversities endured by our loved ones, we should reacquaint ourselves with the stories of tragedies in the Bible.

1. Loss of a Child

- a. Widow of Nain Luke 7:11-17
 - i. What other tragedy had this woman endured?
 - ii. How did Jesus feel toward her (vs. 13)?
- b. Jairus' Daughter Luke 8:40-42, 49-56
 - i. Describe how the father asked for help.
- c. David's Child II Samuel 12:15-23
 - i. What is different in this story than the two above?
 - ii. What did David do before the child died?

2. Death of a Relative
 - a. Mary and Martha's Brother Lazarus John 11:1-44

3. Sickness of a Child
 - a. Daughter of Syro-Phoenician Woman Matthew 15:21-28
 - i. How persistent was this mother in seeking help?

 - b. A Demon-possessed Son Matthew 17:14-21, Mark 9:14-29
 - i. What request did this father make for his son (Matt. 17:15)?

 - ii. How long had the child suffered?

 - iii. Explain the father's faith and lack of faith (Mark 9:22-24).

4. Starvation of Loved Ones
 - a. Gideon's City Judges 6:1-16
 - i. Why was Israel suffering? What was the suffering (vs. 4-6)?

 - ii. When told the Lord was with him, what was Gideon's question?

5. Sickness of a Friend
 - a. Paralyzed Man and His Four Friends Mark 2:1-12
 - i. To what extent did the friends endeavor to help the paralyzed man?

6. Please list additional stories from the Bible to discuss in class:

Spiritual Dangers

All of the parents, siblings, and friends, in the accounts above, shared a common concern for their loved ones: an intense desire to see their suffering relieved, their illness healed. But the results were not always the same. In most of the stories, the loved one was cured, but David's child died, and the scriptures are full of other accounts of unrelieved suffering. All of us know this to be the case in day-to-day life.

It is important, therefore, to recognize the danger to our souls when our desires for our loved ones go unfulfilled. Look again at Lesson 2 where we examined the temptations faced in such situations. Remember that Satan is prepared to use our despair as an opportunity to produce doubt.

Answer the following and be prepared to discuss in class:

1. A Christian with a strong faith prays intensely for her young close friend with cancer to survive. When the friend dies:
 - a. What temptations will this Christian face?
 - b. Do you expect her faith to give way to despair and doubt? Why or why not?

2. How would you answer the questions above if the Christian was a recent convert with an immature faith? What if it were an unbeliever who lost her friend?

3. Given your answers above, and a consideration of the dangers of sorrow to our souls; do we need to be careful about what we say to Christians when they lose a loved one? In other words, do we assume too often that they feel God cares for them or should we be on the lookout for signs that their faith is struggling? Remember the plea of the father in Mark 9:24 regarding his faith.

What we want to remember, and what we want others to remember, is that God truly cares for us. So many passages stress this but consider the following:

Hebrews 13:5b-6 *“For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So that we may boldly say: ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’”*

Romans 8:31-32 *“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”*

In the next lesson, we look at some practical considerations in dealing with the adversities and trials faced by those we love.

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 is 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 are 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

Accepting Adversity and Tragedy

Lesson 9 Personal Trials and Suffering Biblical Background

Introduction

In lessons 4 – 6 we examined large-scale tragedies that, generally speaking, have no direct effect on the quality of our lives. In the last two lessons (7 and 8), we brought our consideration closer to home as we looked at the adversities suffered by our families or friends. In this and the next lesson, our focus will be on ourselves: what do I struggle with, what are my personal trials, and how do I deal with them.

This is a broader topic than the previous lessons. Many things that affect us personally, we would not even notice if they occurred to strangers. We might not even be aware when our own family endures the same trials. Remember the Biblical examples from lesson 7 and the types of tragedies suffered by their loved ones that prompted their actions or grief: death of a child, death of a relative, life threatening diseases and life altering handicaps. Contrast this to the list below of Biblical people who endured a much wider array of problems on a personal basis.

Bible Examples of Personal Suffering

As we saw in lesson 7, the Bible is a book about real people who suffered real sorrow and pain. Examine the following accounts and answer the questions:

1. Jacob is Cheated Genesis 29:15-30
 - a. How did Jacob respond?
 - b. Did God have a deeper purpose in Jacob's adversity

2. Hannah's Barrenness and Oppression I Samuel 1:1-11
 - a. From what did she suffer? What were the sources?
 - b. How did she respond?
 - c. What eventually happened (I Samuel 1:18-20)?

3. Woman with an Issue of Blood Mark 5:24-34
 - a. How long and to what extent did she suffer?

4. Paul's Thorn in the Flesh II Corinthians 12:7-10
 - a. What was the purpose of his suffering?
 - b. What did Paul do?
 - c. Read II Corinthians 11:26-29

5. Joseph's Travails
 - a. If you know the story, list the trials of Joseph and how God used them to good effect:

6. David is Pursued I Samuel 23:15-29
 - a. Read Psalms 69 to understand David's attitude when oppressed.

7. Job Loses Everything

8. Manasseh Loses His Position and Freedom II Chronicles 33:10-13
 - a. What did Manasseh learn?

9. Bartimaeus's Blindness Mark 10:46-52
 - a. How persistent was Bartimaeus?

10. Zedekiah Loses His Family and Sight II Chronicles 36:13, II Kings 25:6-7
 - a. Why did this happen to Zedekiah? Could it have been avoided?

Lessons Learned

While our attention has narrowed from the tragedies of the world to the difficulties we face as individuals, the lessons we have learned along the way still have application. In our next lesson, we will look at additional Biblical principles to help us understand and accept our personal trials, but first look again at some points we have previously covered:

1. Paradox of Pain
 James tells us to count it all joy when we meet various trials. He even describes the good result that will occur from facing the trials (James 1:2-4). We will spend time in lesson 10, seeing how this can be true, but it is reassuring to note that, despite the benefits of trials, God approves of our desire to avoid pain and to seek relief. Look over the Biblical examples above and list the individuals who sought deliverance from their hardship:

Based on these examples, we can use physical resources (doctors, medicines, etc.) for relief, but we should also note the solace provided from our spiritual family, and, of course, we are to pray for God's help. James speaks of calling for the elders in a time of sickness (James 5:14) and in the previous verse he tells us to pray when we are suffering.

2. Limitation of Answers

Once more we should remind ourselves of the message of Isaiah 55:8,9. We will not understand all of God's ways, and in fact, we often will not even know whether God has acted in a situation or simply allowed it to occur. Nevertheless, there are situations when we will understand why we are suffering. Consider those situations when our suffering results directly from our own sinful or reckless behavior. List the Bible characters above who caused their own suffering:

The suffering often results from the actions of others exercising their free will. List examples from the Bible passages above:

It should also be noted that our difficulties might arise specifically because we are Christians (Matthew 5:10-11). While there is consolation in that fact (Matthew 5:12), and we certainly should not be surprised by it, it is still difficult to endure.

3. Opportunity to Set an Example

Remember the world is watching. Our patient endurance in times of hardship will draw attention, and will give us opportunities to explain our faith in Christ. This may be one aspect of walking wisely among those outside the body of Christ - being able to answer everyone (Colossians 4:5-6).

Accepting Adversity and Tragedy

Lesson 10 Personal Trials and Suffering Positive Results

Introduction

We have gone to James 1:2-4 previously and observed that we are to accept our trials joyfully because they lead to good results. Yet this is a hard passage to accept when we are in the midst of difficult times. We need to understand how our trials can help us, and the word of God is full of explanations and examples that will help us see at least some of the benefits that are produced by them.

The Discipline of God

In Hebrews 12, the writer begins by pointing to Jesus who endured the cross (vs. 2) and hostility from sinners (vs. 3). He does this in order to encourage the readers not to grow weary or fainthearted. He then explains that God disciplines us because of His love for us:

1. Read Hebrews 12:1-13
 - a. Whom does God discipline or chasten?
 - b. Without discipline, what would we be?
 - c. Are we told specifically how God disciplines us? Are any examples given here?
 - d. Is the benefit of discipline immediately obvious (vs. 11)?
 - e. What should be our response (vs. 12-13)?
2. When we suffer personal trials will we know with certainty that God is chastening us? Is it a possibility?
3. Can we look at our personal suffering and find beneficial lessons in it, even if we are uncertain as to God's role?

Potential Benefits

As difficult as it may be to appreciate during a period of difficulty, our trials can help us serve God better. James stated that our trials would lead to patience or steadfastness, and that this in turn would lead to our being complete, lacking nothing (James 1:3-4). We

noted above in Hebrews 12:11 where discipline is said to yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

Consider the possible benefits that a Christian may gain from hardship. Trials can:

- Harden and toughen us for even more difficult days ahead. Successfully enduring a trial will give us confidence for those we face in the future.
- Help us appreciate more the blessings that we have. Think of how often we take our blessings for granted until they are placed in jeopardy.
- Help us to examine and recognize what truly matters most in life. A loss of a job or declining health will focus our attention on our family, on our brothers and sisters in Christ, and hopefully on our relationship with God.
- Help us to cease depending solely upon our own strength. We frequently forget to depend upon God who is our helper (Hebrews 13:6), but a trial can cause us to turn to Him.
- Draw our attention away from the material things of life. Look at Paul's comments about what we really need in life (I Timothy 6:6-10). Unfortunately, we sometimes must suffer loss to understand that we brought nothing into the world and can take nothing out.
- Helps us to recognize the temporary nature of life. James says that our life is a mere vapor that appears for a moment and disappears (James 4:14). Paul told the rich (I Timothy 6:17-19) to look beyond the uncertainty of riches and store up a "*good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.*" But all too often, it takes heartache and hardship to help us see this truth.

Look over the list of benefits above. Is it not also true that an individual can suffer a trial and have the very opposite of these benefits result? Instead of hardening them, it crushes them. Instead of causing a focus on true blessings or the temporary nature of life, the individual becomes obsessed with the suffering and sees nothing else. What really determines whether a trial will help us or weaken us? Let's look at some Biblical examples.

Two Examples

The Apostle Paul probably suffered as much as a child of God as anyone of whom we have a record. Yet he retained his faith through it all.

1. Read II Corinthians 11:23-29 for a reminder of his suffering. Then read II Corinthians 4:17 – 5:10. What was Paul's secret?

The Hebrew Christians endured great trials, but as they faced more they needed reminders to avoid being overwhelmed:

2. Read Hebrews 10:32-39.
 - a. What had they suffered in the past?
 - b. How had they responded in the past?
 - c. What did they need now (vs. 35-36)?
 - d. What could be the blessing for them (vs. 39)?

A Christian's Blessings

For a person who does not know Christ, none of this lesson has any real meaning. How can there be any real benefit to pain and trials if this life is all that we have? If we are not believers, and we lose all in this life or the portion of life that seems to matter most to us, how can we possibly view trials with anything but scorn and dread?

This lesson can only be appreciated by a child of God. A Christian also has blessings that will enable him or her to overcome the problems of life. Two in particular are worth noting because they are blessings to enjoy in this life.

1. Consolation of a Christian Family

Peter remarked in Mark 10:28 that he and the other Apostles had left all to follow Jesus. Jesus responded (Mark 10:29-30) by explaining that they would receive in this life a hundredfold houses and brothers and sisters and mothers. We may lose our material goods in life, but a faithful Christian gains a family throughout the world. Thus we are told to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). As comforting as this blessing is, we need to remember that it is a two-way street. We must also share our goods with those Christians who are in need (I John 3:16-18).

2. Peace from God

There is a peace of God that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7). It will allow us to face life without anxiety and worry (Matthew 6:25-34). It is this peace that permits us to have godliness with contentment which, Paul assures us, is great gain (I Timothy 6:6).

These blessings will be ours only if we make an effort to take hold of them and use them. God will not force them on us, but they are great promises and belong only to His family.

Accepting Adversity and Tragedy

Lesson 11 When and How to Pray

Introduction

In our study to this point we have looked at the many questions that arise when we see tragedies in the world, and even more to the point: when we see adversity among our loved ones or experience it firsthand. Sometimes there are answers to our questions, but other times we must simply admit that the thoughts and ways of God are higher than ours. But even though we may not fully understand the adversities we experience, we still want to know: what should we do about them? The Bible's answer is simpler than we may expect. James 5:13, "*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.*" In this lesson and the following one we want to take a look at the role of prayer. God expects us to pray in times of need, and His scriptures have a lot to say about the purpose and method of prayer.

The Power of Prayer

Read James 5:13-18. Not only does James say that we should pray when we suffer, but he makes it clear that prayer is a powerful.

1. If someone is sick, what are they do? What are they to expect will be done for them?
2. What will the prayer of faith do for those who are sick?
3. What is true of the prayers of a righteous man?
4. What example is given of the power of prayer?

As we will see below, not only should we pray in a time of sickness, but it is appropriate to pray in many situations. In the context of this study, we should in particular pray for:

- The ability to accept our circumstances
- The ability to understand our situation
- Greater faith to face our trials (remember the request of the father in Mark 9:24)
- Relief from our trials and afflictions
- Alleviation of our loved ones' pain and suffering
- Safety and protection
- Wisdom to explain to others the goodness of God

God's Willingness to Hear

We may not always understand why God allows something to happen, but we can be assured of God's interest in hearing us for we have a high priest who also suffered (Hebrews 2:18), one who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses having been tempted as we are (Hebrews 4:15). Thus the Hebrews writer says we should; "*with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*" (Hebrews 4:16).

Read Luke 18:1-8 and Matthew 7:7-11. Jesus is assuring us of God's desire for our prayer:

1. According to vs. 1, what was the main purpose of the parable in Luke 18?
2. What was Jesus concerned that He might not find (18:8)?
3. What is said of God in Matthew 7:11?
4. What promise is given to us in Matthew 7:7-8 and also Luke 11:9-10

We often wonder when we should pray; when does our problem merit God's attention. The Scriptures above make it clear that God is prepared to not only hear us, but also to respond. Look at Luke 11:5-13 and again at Luke 18:1-8. The answer would seem to be - if a circumstance is important to us it will be important to God. Note in these two parables that each of the two petitioners went to the only person who could help them, and each sought something very important to them; in one case justice and in the other aid for a friend.

As you think back over the adversities and trials we have studied; consider how many times our needs fit this same pattern. We face a trial where only God can help us. We urgently desire the request we make of God. There is no reason to doubt that we should pray in such situations. The question really should be do we pray enough, and do we pray as we should.

Look at these Biblical examples of those who prayed when in distress:

1. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-39)
2. Paul and Silas (Acts 16:22-25, see also Paul's statement in Philippians 4:6)
3. Peter and James (Acts 4:23-29, see also Peter's statement in I Peter 5:6-11)
4. The Jerusalem Church (Acts 12:5)
5. Manasseh (II Chronicles 33:10-13)
6. David (Psalms 17:6-13)

How to Pray

The manner of our prayer does matter. James refers to those who do not receive because they ask wrongly (James 4:3). Our prayers in times of distress should have at least three characteristics:

1. Ask in Faith

James tells us to ask in faith with no doubting, being promised that a doubting person should not suppose that he or she will receive anything (James 1:6-7). If we recognize that God wants us to pray, we should have confidence that our prayer will be heard, that God will respond.

2. Ask Persistently

Think again of the parables in Luke 11 and 18 and the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:7-11). We are told repeatedly of the value of persistence. It may well be that there is value to us in simply going to God often in prayer, but these passages also imply that our prayers are more effective, they accomplish more, when we pray to God with fervor and persistence.

3. Ask that God's Will Be Done

It is easier to say this than to mean it. We have the example of Jesus who prayed in the Garden the night he was betrayed. Hebrews 5:7 refers to this prayer saying that Jesus, "*offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence*". Yet we know that Jesus did die. In His prayer, Jesus repeatedly prayed for relief, but each time adding "*Yet not what I will, but what You will*" (Mark 14:36).

A Look Ahead

Even proper prayer does not assure us of relief from our problems in life. In the next lesson, we will look at accepting God's response whatever it may be.

Accepting Adversity and Tragedy

Lesson 12 Prayer Accepting God's Answer

Introduction

The previous lesson was designed to encourage us to pray in times of adversity and trials. After all, James 5:6 and I Peter 5:6-7 tell us to do so. But sometimes, prayer fails to provide us with the comfort we seek. We recognize that our job is at risk, and we pray urgently that we might keep it, yet we are still laid off. We pray that a loved one will recover from an illness, but we watch them continue to suffer. In situations like this, we often wonder why our prayers do not accomplish what we seek. We look for reasons why God has not acted as we desired, and numerous questions come to mind:

- Does God not care enough?
- Was God unable to help us?
- Did we ask in the wrong way or for the wrong thing?
- Did God reject us because of our sin?

We will look at the answers to each of these questions before examining the example of Paul and his thorn in the flesh.

Does God Not Care Enough?

We have looked at numerous passages that speak to the concern of God (Hebrews 13:5-6, Romans 8:31-32), but consider the actions of God toward His own son:

1. Read Mark 14:32-39, Luke 22:44.
 - a. What was Jesus' specific request of the Father?
 - b. Describe the intensity of His prayer and request?
 - c. Did Jesus receive that for which He asked?
2. Read Hebrews 5:7-9
 - a. Though Jesus still suffered on the cross, did God care for Him? Did He hear His prayer?
 - b. What purpose was served by God not answering Jesus' prayer exactly as He requested (vs. 9)?

Remember also that Christ Jesus is God the Son. When we wonder if God cares, we are also questioning the concern of God the Son. Christ suffered as we do (Hebrews 2:18, 4:15); He even knows what it is like to pray and not be given exactly what He asked for.

Imagine how hard it was for the Father not to remove the cup of suffering as the Son had asked, but remember that He did it for us; and yet now we question whether God cares for us! We can be assured that God cares.

Was God Unable to Help Us?

Remember the words of Paul describing God in Ephesians 3:20, "*Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us*". This passage addresses the very power that God has to do what we ask for in prayer. In fact, it comes at the end of a prayer that Paul made for the Ephesians (Ephesians 3:14-19).

What we sometimes mean by this question is that we wonder how God can respond to our prayers when we know that the age of miracles has ceased. We question whether God can or will do much for us if it is not in the form of a miracle. We should not doubt the providential powers of God. He has answered prayers without miraculous intervention throughout the periods of the Bible and He can do so today.

Paul spoke to the Corinthians of such care provided by God. Read II Corinthians 1:3-11; it is a wonderful passage about God helping those that suffer, and in turn those that are helped providing comfort to others.

1. Read again II Corinthians 1:8-11. In whom did Paul trust (vs. 9)?
2. He says God delivered him. Is there any indication that this was done by a miracle? He most likely refers to the incident at Ephesus in Acts 19:21-41, where he was saved without a miracle.
3. To what other help does Paul refer in vs. 11?

Did We Ask in the Wrong Way or for the Wrong Thing?

To a large extent we have answered this question in lesson 11. Look back to the instructions at the end of the lesson as to how we should pray. We could add to the list the fact that we should be reverent and humble (Isaiah 6:5, Luke 18:9-14), but if we have prayed in the manner described then we can be confident that God is not displeased with the manner of our prayer.

As to the content of our prayer, the real question should be our motivation in prayer. As long as we are not going to God with a sinful motive, it is unlikely that we are praying for the wrong thing. This is especially true when we are praying in a time of suffering and distress for ourselves or for those we love. God is not displeased by our desire for relief (remember the Paradox of Pain), and will not be displeased by a sincere and earnest plea from those who love Him.

Did God Reject Us Because of Our Sin?

This question arises frequently as we think of the vast difference between us (sinful men and women) and the Holy God of Heaven. We also recognize that the prayer of a righteous man is said to avail much (James 5:17). But I think this is the wrong question to focus on. When we ask this question, one of two things is true: either we are aware of sin in our life and wonder whether that sin has caused God to reject us, or we are unaware of any specific sin, but have a nagging feeling that we are not good enough for God to hear. In both cases, we should focus on something else first before worrying about our prayer.

1. If we know we are guilty of a sin, we should take care of that sin first. Rather than trying to decide the effect of the sin on the mind of God, we should strive to be forgiven by repenting and confessing this sin to God.
2. If we have this nagging feeling that we are not good enough for God to answer our prayer, it is time for us to review the passages that encourage us to have boldness in coming to God in prayer (Hebrews 4:16, I John 5:14-15). God loves us, and despite our many flaws, He is willing to forgive and wants us to seek Him out in prayer. It is important that we have confidence in this fact.

The Example of Paul

But, we might ask, if God has not failed to respond because of one of these reasons; why has He not done as we have prayed? Since God is not at fault through a lack of concern or ability, and assuming we have prayed as we should; we are left with only one possibility: God has chosen to do that which is in our best interest. We may not understand how this is true, but it must be.

In the life of Paul, we have a good example of dealing with God's response. Read II Corinthians 12:5-10.

1. For what did Paul ask? Was he persistent? Did he intensely desire that God grant his request?
2. Paul was somewhat more fortunate than us in that he receive a direct answer from God, but he get what he asked for?
3. What did God tell him? How did Paul respond?

In the end, like much of what we have studied throughout this class, it comes down to accepting that God is good and that He always does that which can result in our benefit if only we are willing to accept God's answer.

Accepting Adversity and Tragedy

Lesson 13 Hope The Ultimate Answer

Introduction

This is the last lesson in this series but it is not a review of the material we have studied. Instead, we will look beyond this life, with its trials and adversities, and look toward our hope of a home in heaven. We have considered our hope of eternal life at times during this class. In lesson 3, God's promise of eternal life was viewed as evidence of His goodness; later we saw how the Hebrews endured gladly the loss of their goods because they knew they had a better and abiding possession (Hebrews 10:34); the Thessalonians were told not to grieve as those who have no hope (I Thess. 4:13); and Paul spoke of his constant physical suffering as mere light affliction because he could see the heavenly dwelling that awaited him (II Corinthians 4:17 – 5:2).

Other Consolations

In learning how to accept the tragedies and difficulties of life, we must concentrate on those things that God has given to console us. Remember how we have discussed:

1. Christian Family – We gain a hundredfold houses and brothers and sisters and parents when we become a child of God (Mark 10:29-30). Brethren who will help to bear our burdens.
2. Peace from God – We are promised a peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7), one that will allow us to face life without anxiety (Matthew 6:31-33).
3. Prayer – We are told simply, if you suffer pray (James 5:13). We are promised that God will hear and that our prayers will accomplish a great deal.

All three of these serve as wonderful consolations to help us endure the difficulties of life. But each one is really only applicable to a Christian. A Christian family would only be truly meaningful to a Christian; God promises His peace only to those who are in Christ; and the prayer described by James is to be that of a righteous individual (James 5:16). How difficult it is to face the kinds of trials and sorrows we have discussed throughout this class without a relationship with God. Such a relationship holds the promise of this life, but even more the life that is to come (I Timothy 4:8). A life without the consolation of God's blessings is a wasted and empty life as well as one filled with additional pain and anguish.

Hope at the End

David asked to understand this in Psalms 39. Read Psalms 39:1-7.

1. What was David's condition before he prayed to God (vs. 2-3)?
2. What did he ask God to make him know (vs. 4-6)?
3. Where was his hope (vs. 7)?

There is a great value in being able to look beyond this life and see where we are headed. To see what the true end of life is. But we must have hope that something wonderful awaits us at the end. A passage that stresses both our hope and our end is I Peter 1:3-9.

1. Our hope is said to be a living hope, one that serves us now. How did we receive the hope (vs. 3)?
2. Specifically, where is our hope and what is it (vs. 4)?
3. What does this hope allow us to do, even if we are grieved by various trials?
4. What happens to a faith that is tested?
5. What is the end of our faith (vs. 9)?

So much of our study is summed up in this passage. As Christians we accept the trials of life that would crush those who do not know Christ; we do this joyfully because the trials draw us closer to God, and because we see the ultimate salvation of our souls.

Hope, an Anchor of the Soul

Satan uses the sufferings of life to raise doubts in our minds about God. He looks upon adversity as an opportunity to sway us, to cause us to drift away from God, but a proper hope prevents this from happening. Read Hebrews 6:11-20.

1. What does the writer desire us to have until the end (vs. 11)?
2. To what should we hold fast (vs. 18)?
3. What is the anchor of our souls (vs. 19)?

Great sufferings and trials tend to overwhelm us, blotting out all other considerations. But when our hope of eternal life becomes a constant part of our view of everyday life, then hope will arise even in the most difficult of trials to keep our faith in God strong.

Heaven

Let's learn to wait patiently "*for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ*" (Titus 2:13). When that moment comes, all the pain and heartache and suffering of this life will quickly be forgotten: as we dwell in a place without tears, without death, without mourning, without crying, and without pain (Revelations 21:1-4).