

Healthy Attitude Toward Tragedy • Romans 5:1-5

Our daily radio program, *Faith Matters*, elicits some interesting responses. Once, while talking to a fellow passenger on an airplane he said, “I know your voice from somewhere.” Then there are the calls and the e-mail messages. Most of it is very positive and encouraging, but occasionally some is critical and hostile.

A recent e-mail said that the listener had heard *Faith Matters* and it was obvious to him that Leith Anderson had never experienced any tragedy in his life. My first response was to write a mental list in my own defense: caught in two overseas wars (one in the Middle East and one in Africa); losing a job I loved; going through family crises; the day my brother died on a plane at Charlotte airport. But my second response was that the listener is right. I’ve never been diagnosed with a terminal disease or a chronic disability. My home has never burned down. Our children are all alive. I’ve had the same job for most of my adult life. I have not experienced any of the horrific tragedies that make the front page of the national newspapers.

Somehow tragedies defy any rating system. How do you assign greater or lesser points to the death of a child, a diagnosis of cancer, bankruptcy, an unwanted divorce or a violent assault? And which is worse, losing your hearing or losing your sight, the death of a mother or the Alzheimer’s of a father?

Sooner or later we all get to taste some of the flavors of tragedy. When we do, how do we respond? Specifically, how do we respond as Christians? Some people are devastated if not destroyed by some lesser tragedy while other people are able to rise above horrendous difficulties.

In 1981, the movie *Chariots of Fire* won five Academy Awards including one for Best Picture.

The film told the story of Eric Liddell and the 1924 Olympic games in Paris. Liddell was born in China to missionary parents and was sent back to their native Scotland for his education.

Liddell was a very fast runner with an unorthodox running style. His best event was the 100-yard dash. His Christian convictions led him to refuse to compete in sports on Sundays, which he considered to be the Lord’s Day, a day of worship and rest. The trials for his event, the 100-yard dash, were held on a Sunday and because

he refused to participate he was disqualified for that event. Some would call it a tragedy and others would say it was religious stupidity. At the last minute he switched events and competed in the 400-yard run, an event for which he had never trained. At one point he

tripped and fell and was almost eliminated, but he finished five yards ahead of his nearest competitors and set a world record of 47.6 seconds. He left the 1924 Paris Olympiad with both a gold and a bronze medal.

Eric Liddell knew tragedy firsthand, but he had a wonderfully positive attitude toward the tragedies he faced. He stumbled into tragedy and turned it into triumph. Some would say that tripping in the Olympics hardly qualifies as a tragedy—certainly not when measured against terminal brain tumors or being interred in a concentration camp. But actually, Eric Liddell qualifies on all counts. After the 1924 Olympics Eric Liddell became a missionary to China. He married a Canadian woman and they had three children. As the Japanese armies advanced he sent his wife back to her native Canada, along with their three daughters. They would never see each other again. He was captured and interred in Weishien concentration camp where he was diagnosed with a brain tumor and died there in

Just because your tragedy doesn't make the evening news does not mean that your heart is less broken or that your fears are less real.

1945.

Tragedy is tragedy. It is the unexpected, the uninvited, the unwanted. Tragedies change the course of our lives. Most often they are permanent, leaving scars on our bodies, sadness in our hearts and death in our cemeteries. Rarely is it helpful to compare one tragedy to another. Just because your tragedy doesn't make the evening news does not mean that your heart is less broken or that your fears are less real.

The champion of biblical tragedies was Job. Job was rich and healthy and happy until one awful day when tragedy struck his life and took it all. We learn in Job 1:13-19:

One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

While he was speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

As if that were not enough, Job soon became desperately and painfully ill with sores covering his entire body. Then his friends began to turn

against him and his wife's counsel was to curse God and die.

When tragedy struck Job everyone was loaded with questions. The Old Testament book that tells his story has 42 chapters containing 300 questions. Most of those questions are left unanswered. Although the readers of Job's biography are given an explanation of why he was so tragically afflicted, there is no hint that Job ever heard the answer himself. He died not knowing.

Many of us will never have our questions answered either. We will go through the rest of life with the scars and remnants of the tragedy and will die without really knowing why the tragedies happened. God does not promise to answer all our questions but he does promise to stick with us and help us when tragedies strike. All of this calls for a distinctly Christian approach. We do not choose tragedy, but we can learn and we can have a healthy attitude toward the tragedies when they come into our lives. In Romans 5:1-5, St. Paul wrote:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to us.

St. Paul was no stranger to tragedy. He lost friends, he had chronic physical problems, he was shipwrecked, he was left to waste away in prison, and he eventually died under the Roman executioner's sword. Out of his own experience he describes an astonishingly Christian approach to tragedy in just seven words: faith; peace; grace; perseverance; character; hope; love.

Faith is a synonym for trust. It is believing God for good, even when we cannot see God or good. Faith is the central element of all that it

means to be a Christian. In its most important expression, faith is trusting God to forgive our sin and give to us eternal life through Jesus. In the face of tragedy, faith is trusting God for good even when we have just sustained the most horrible blow of our entire lives, even when we cannot get the answers to our questions.

Peace is a gift from God that flows from faith. It settles deep into our souls. We cannot fake peace—we either have it or we don't. Peace comes when we truly believe that God is in charge and that God is good. We choose to trust him for that which we cannot control ourselves.

Grace is not as abstract as peace and faith. You can see, hear, feel and taste grace. Grace is the tangible good news of God in our lives. Grace is the series of gifts God gives to us to get us through all of life's tragedies and triumphs. Grace may be money, job, family, friends, medicine, a Bible verse or whatever other gift God chooses to give. Jesus promised in 2 Corinthians 12:9: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

...the Christian who trusts God hangs in there for a promised tomorrow that will be better.

Perseverance is "hanging in there". It is not giving up when things happen that we would never choose to have happen. It is remaining faithful. One of the more common responses to tragedy is giving up too soon. Perseverance is giving God time to help us and to heal us. This is far more than wishful thinking. Christian perseverance is possible only because of faith, peace and grace. We trust God. God settles our hearts and gives us whatever resources we need in order to hang in there.

Next on Paul's list is character. Character is the internal strength to do what is right. Quite candidly, those who have easy lives risk having weak character. It is the tragedies, sufferings and difficulties of life that build, hone and strengthen us on the inside. Tragedy often serves the dual purpose of showing on the outside what we are made of and strengthening us on the inside. Character is being faithful to God independent of the

situation in which we find ourselves.

Hope is the expectation of a better tomorrow. Tragedy has a way of crushing hope. We somehow think that there is no tomorrow or that tomorrow will be even more tragic and desperately bleak than today. But the Christian who trusts God hangs in there for a promised tomorrow that will be better. Not one that we can design, but one that God chooses and shapes. We don't know what it will be like in advance because he does not tell us, but we trust him, and we are told here by St. Paul that we will not be disappointed.

Last on Paul's list of seven words is love. Love is the compassionate care of God through the entire process. *"And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us."* When facing tragedy it is good to have professional help, like emergency medical care. But it is even better to

have the best professional assistance given by someone who truly and deeply cares for you as a person. God is absolutely professional and competent in getting us through the tragedies of life, but he also passionately loves us every step of the way.

None of us seeks tragedy for ourselves, nor should we ever wish tragedy on others. However, from a Christian perspective comes the confidence that God can and will use tragedy for good. In a survey, 87% of those who have experienced a painful event such as the death of a loved one, serious illness, the break-up of a relationship or divorce say that it caused them to find a more positive meaning in life. In the words of St. Paul in 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."* That's you. That's me.

Lance Armstrong is called the world's best cyclist. He is the multiple winner of the Tour de

France. When he was 25 years old he was tragically diagnosed with advanced testicular cancer. After months of chemotherapy he just laid on the couch, eating and drinking, until one day his wife Kriston said, “You need to decide something: Are you going to be a golf-playing, beer-drinking, Mexican-food eating slob for the rest of your life?”

Lance Armstrong says:

“This conversation changed everything. Within days I was back on my bicycle. For the first time in my life I rode with real strength and stamina and purpose. Without cancer, I never would have won a single Tour de France. Cancer taught me a plan for more purposeful living, and then in turn taught me how to train and to win more purposefully. Pain and loss are great enhancers.

“I become a happier man each time

I suffer.”

I find that a startling statement. But it brings us back to our own question. As Christians, what shall be our attitude toward tragedy? Let it be the attitude that is shaped by God in these seven words: faith; peace; grace; perseverance; character; hope; love. Let it be the attitude of Romans 8:28, “*And we know that in all things God works for good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*”

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faimatters.fm
©Leith Anderson