

Overcoming Grief - Comfort For Those Left Behind

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August 8, 2010

On November 8th, 1994, Scott Willis and his wife, Janet, were traveling with six of their nine children on Highway I-94 near Milwaukee when a piece of metal fell from the truck ahead of them. Scott had no choice but to let the object pass under his vehicle. The result was the rear gas tank exploded on their mini-van and five of the six children with them died instantly in the flames. The sixth child, Benjamin, died a few hours later.

Scott and Janet sustained burns but they were able to escape from the vehicle. Standing on the side of the road, watching their children die in the raging inferno, Scott said to Janet, *"This is the moment for which we are prepared."* What a strange reaction to the death of their children. As Christians, what held their soul in that dark hour? Today we will find the answer.

This summer, we are in a series called, "The Mysteries of Heaven." We are learning what the Bible says about life after death. Today, we are taking a slight deviation from our series. Rather than learning more about what happens to us after we die, we are focusing on helping those left behind. As I look back on my twenty years as a pastor, the death of a child or a spouse leaves some of the most hurtful wounds I have seen in those left behind. Some people can not go on. Where can we find some measure of rest for grieving hearts? Where is comfort found for those left behind?

To find an answer, let's think a little more about what happened to the Willis family. Most people believe what happened to them was a tragic accident.

I don't want to come across insensitive but, according to the Bible, is that true?

Was the death of six of the Willis children purely an accident that was out of

God's control?

This may upset some of us, but I am going to say it anyway. What we call an accident, according to the Bible, is nothing less than a well planned act of God.

Think of all the events that had to converge for the Willis' tragedy.

- If only they had started their trip one minute earlier, or one minute later.
- If only the truck was at a different location on the expressway.
- If only the piece of metal had fallen moments before or moments later.
- If only the metal tumbled into the ditch rather than lodging itself between the gas tank and road at just the right time.

All of us have our list of "if onlys."

- If only we had called the doctor sooner, she wouldn't have died of cancer.
- If only the road department had salted that part of the highway, she wouldn't have slid off the road.
- If only she had noticed the lump sooner.
- If only they had operated sooner, if only they hadn't operated.

I want you to know that God is bigger than our mistakes. God is bigger than our oversights. God was not taken by surprise when a piece of steel fell randomly from a truck on the expressway. We must remember that events that are completely out of our control are firmly in His control.

We have the word *accident* in our vocabulary, God doesn't. Seemingly random accidents, ill health, or even death at the hand of an enemy - are all means God uses to bring his children home to him. God entrusts *his* children to *his* care. *God's children can only die according to God's timetable.* Nothing can happen to God's children unless God ordains it to happen, that includes death.

This morning, I want to give you two things you can rest in when you are faced with the death of someone you love that will give us a measure of comfort as we try to overcome grief. I just explained to you the first point. When someone we love dies, we need to rest in God's providence.

Rest in the Providence of God.

God's children die at just the right time.

To explain what it means to rest in God's providence when someone we love dies, let's look at the death of Jesus.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. John 13:1 (ESV)

This was the hour into which was compacted the agony of Gethsemane, the betrayal of Judas and his excruciating death on the cross. Interestingly, we read before this that while others wanted Jesus out of the picture, they could do nothing to him because *his hour had not yet come.*

So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come. John 7:30 (ESV)

These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come. John 8:20 (ESV)

Here is the what I want us to notice. *Until his hour came, Christ's enemies were powerless against him.* Jesus came to earth at the hour appointed by his father, he would return to heaven at the hour appointed by his father. Nothing could make Jesus die sooner than God planned. Jesus was bullet proof until the father decided it was the hour to bring him home. If Jesus was bullet-proof until the father decided it was time for him to come home, why wouldn't we, as Christ's brothers and sisters, also be bullet-proof until the hour when God says it is time to for us to come home?

Even in the process of his death, John 19:33 tells us Jesus died more quickly than most. He died at the exact hour the Passover lamb was sacrificed. He died right on schedule because he was the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world.

This does not mean we all get to go and eat high cholesterol food because a plugged artery may be the means God uses to bring us home to him but we know that no accident or scheme of man can destroy us until God decides it is time for us to come home to him.

God's children die when their work is complete.

Jesus died young at the age of thirty-three. I always wondered why he died young. If I was in charge of planning his life, why not fifty-three? He could have spent more years healing and maybe we would have more in our gospels to learn about Jesus. No doubt, people living in the ancient world wondered why Christ died when he did. Why did Jesus die at a young age?

I think the answer is that Christ died after he completed the work His heavenly father gave him to accomplish.

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.
John 17:4 (ESV)

I don't think this is just true about Christ, I believe this is true of us as Christians. We are here to accomplish the work God gave us to do. We may think we have until age eighty-three to do that work but God's plan may be that we bring it to completion at the age of thirty-three and then he will take us home. God may say our work is done, long before we are old and frail.

Some of God's best servants died at an early age but they died when they were finished with their work. They couldn't have died a moment before. Keith Green didn't die young, he died when he was finished with his work. Rich Mullens didn't die young, he died when God decided he was finished with his work. No matter how tragic or senseless the death of a Christian appears to us, we need to know that Satan did not frustrate the mission God planned for them to accomplish.

Knowing this provides a measure of peace to the widow who unexpectedly loses her husband 6 months after he retires. It provides peace to the mother who loses her teenage daughter in a traffic accident. Our plans and desires are that they would live much longer. It is good to have those plans and desires, we just need to realize that God's purpose for their life might be completed long before ours and when their life is completed, God's plans were not frustrated.

This seems especially hard to imagine with the death of a child. It seems like a mockery of life itself when a young boy or girl dies before they have

experienced the joy of accomplishment. It is like putting a period before a sentence is written. A child's short life can fulfill the will of God. Though we do not understand it, that little one has "finished the work God has given him (or her) to do."

April 20, 1999 two high school students walked into Columbine High and murdered twelve students and one teacher, cutting them down in the prime of their life. Two of the students killed that day were Cassie Bernell and Rachel Scott, both followers of Christ. While I don't want to lessen the pain or the tragedy of their death, we need to know that nothing could happen to them that day if their life's work was not complete and God hadn't decided to call them home. Let me say it again. Satan can not derail the mission God gives his children to complete.

God's children cannot be derailed by Satan's schemes.

Of course, this does not release Dylan Klebold or Eric Harris from the responsibility of their actions. Before God they will be held responsible for their actions and as we learned in previous weeks, their experience of hell will be justly harsher as murderers. God allowed their murderous actions to accomplish the will he had for Cassie and Rachel. Neither Eric, Dylan nor Satan thwarted the plans and work God had for Cassie and Rachel's life, God only used Eric and Dylan's murderous intentions to complete the plan.

This reminds me of the book of Job. Job went through all kinds of agonies and tortures but Satan needed to ask God's permission to touch Job. Nothing

happened to Job that God did not ordain. That isn't just true of sickness and pain but it is also true about death.

It is the same thing with the death of Christ. God used the murderous desires of the religious leaders in Christ's day to complete his plans, not to thwart them.

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Acts 4:28 (NIV)

If Christ's could only be murdered according to God's plan and according to God's time, why should we think that a believer who is gunned down in a murder, or dies when only a few days old or dies in a nursing home at a ripe old age, is any less under the care of God. No evil tragedy can keep God from accomplishing the work he has given us to do through our lives.

The one who knows the number of hairs on our head and sees the sparrow fall has the destiny of every one of our days in His loving hands.

Our death is just as meticulously planned as the death of Christ. God even uses the plans of evil men, who think they succeed in the destruction of God's children, for his glory, just like he did with Christ, his son. That doesn't mean God releases evil men from the guilt of their murderous heart but that Gods purposes are never frustrated, even when his saints face death.

This is incredibly important. It is the only way to release us from the false guilt and dark remorse that hangs over our head. If only I had not sent my child to school that day. If only they had studied the night before so they didn't need to study in the library over lunch. If only we had never moved. According to God, everything occurs within the circle of God's divine providence.

The immediate cause of death may be any of a number of things but the ultimate cause of death is God. Just as he gives life, he has the right to take it away. He ascribes to us the plan our lives are to fulfill and he has the right to take us home once the plan is accomplished. We can trust in him.

God's children die in the right way.

It is not just the time of death that is ordained by God, so is the means of death. Christ told Peter how he would die

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.” John 21:18–19 (ESV)

Church tradition tells us that in old age, Peter was tied to a cross, had his hands stretched out and he was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same way as Christ. Can anyone deny that Christ chose the way Peter was to die?

Most likely, our death will not be by crucifixion but we know that the way we die will be God's choice. It is his choice for how we will glorify him. Christ reminds us, we are not to fear the way we die, the real fear is what happens after we die.

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Matthew 10:28 (ESV)

Knowing the tragedy of death is not out of God's control and that God will use it to accomplish his purpose through our lives brings a measure of comfort in the face of grief. But it is not just the power of God's control that comforts us, it is the disposition of his heart.

Rest in the Goodness of God.

The problem with resting in God's providence is it feels like God is evil or uncaring when we are lost in the darkness of those painful hours. We need to also rest in something that doesn't feel true, but we know is true, God's goodness.

When George Mueller spoke at his wife's funeral, he gave a simple three point sermon from Psalm 119:68.

You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees. Psalm 119:68 (NIV)

These were the three points of his sermon.

- God was good in giving her to me.
- God was good in letting me have her as long as he did.
- God was good in taking her from me.

I want you to notice something. He didn't start from his emotions or even his circumstances. Both of those change every day. He started from something he knew would never change, the goodness of God. Even when we don't see it, in times of darkness and despair, we know it is still true.

This is one of the great mistakes we make. We think God is good if we have a lot of money in the bank. We think God is good if we have an Escalade in the driveway. We think God is good if we have a perfect marriage or if our children are getting straight A's in school and playing on a varsity sport. We say God is good when all is good. What happens when things change? What happens when your daughter's face is smashed through a windshield in a head on collision with a drunk driver? What happens when you come home and your

spouse tells you she has a terminal disease? What happens when you are fired and go month after month looking for a job. Can you still say, "God is good?"

The goodness of God doesn't change. He loves us, he sent his son to die for us. Even when tragedy unfolds around us and evil raises its flag of victory in our lives, God is good, his love for us is sure. Our circumstances may have changed, but God hasn't. Everything can change, but there is one thing that doesn't change. God is good. He loves us.

Conclusion

At the age of twenty-six, Lina Berg was accompanying her father aboard a ship across Lake Vattern in Sweden on route to the city of Gothenburg. The ship gave an unexpected lurch when it was hit by a rogue wave and Lina's dearly loved father, a devout Christian, fell overboard and drowned in front of her eyes. From her broken heart she wrote a song many of us have sung. I want to read the lines of her song. As I read, I want you to listen for how she sought to rest her heart in the two things we talked about today, God's providence and his goodness.

Day by day with each passing moment,
Strength I find to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment, (*providence*)
I've no cause for worry or for fear. (*providence*)

He whose heart is kind beyond all measure (*goodness*)
Gives unto each day what He deems best - (*goodness*)
Lovingly, its part of pain and pleasure, (*goodness*)
Mingling toil with peace and rest.

Every day the Lord Himself is near me
With a special mercy for each hour; (*goodness*)
All my cares he fain would bear, and cheer me,
He whose name is Counselor and Pow'r.

The protection of His child and treasure (*providence*)
Is a charge that on Himself He laid; (*providence*)
“As thy days, your strength shall be in measure,”
This the pledge to me He made.

Remarkably, Lina had confidence that the death of her father, which many would simply ascribe to an accident on a wind-blown ship was a carefully planned act of God. Her father’s work was done and that was God’s chosen method of calling him home.



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