

Christmas in Newtown 2012

My niece and nephew do not attend Sandy Hook Elementary, but they do live in Newtown and they lost friends. This tragic mass-murder of twenty children and seven adults has had an emotional impact on our family. It also has raised lots of questions – not just in the minds of the children – about whether God is real, whether he cares, whether he is good, and if those answers are “yes” then why evil thrives and why God did not stop this from happening. The Bible provides some information that can help us answer these questions. I wanted to write something joyful and hopeful about Christmas, but I was preoccupied with this tragedy, and Christmas itself is part of the answer to these questions. So I hope in the end you will find inspiration for joy and hope, even if parts of what I write make you uncomfortable.

Before you read the rest of this, I would like you to consider the source of my perspective. These are my reflections on our need for what Christians celebrate at Christmas, and that need is vivid in my mind because my niece and nephew live in Newtown. Also, these are my reflections as an evangelical pastor who believes in the Old and New Testaments as God’s revelation. If you are likely to be offended by biblical Christian thought or its use in trying to understand the Newtown tragedy, I will understand if you do not read the rest of this. If you are not ready to think about these things, because you are still very emotional about the tragedy, I will understand that too. If you do read this and are bothered by it, let’s talk; but let’s respect each other even when we disagree, and please trust that my motivation is pure and I did not set out to offend you. Truly, I hope these reflections will glorify God and comfort and strengthen those of you who read them.

As we ask why people suffer, we must admit that human sinfulness is part of the problem. God lovingly created people in his own image, to reflect his character and represent him on Earth. Part of making us in his own image was that God endowed us with free will, free will to walk with God or to rebel against him. This is part of God’s love for us: he endowed us with an amazing ability and an amazing responsibility. Sadly, from the very beginning, our ancestors freely chose to rebel against God, to sin, which is to do something against the character or will of God. Sin has caused a corruption in the human nature. We all inherited that corruption, which has been passed down through the generations, and that corruption entices each of us to sin. We are the only species that does not naturally know how to live the way God created it to live. The Jewish scriptures [the Old Testament] and the later New Testament explain how to live God’s way, but we often neglect those teachings and continue to live by our corrupted instincts, corrupted rationality, and corrupted desires. Much of our suffering is caused by our own free will decisions to sin or the free will decisions of other people to sin in ways that hurt us.

Evil is another part of the problem. Satan and his demons are angels who rebelled against God. They cause evil things to happen and influence people to sin. Obviously, being willing to murder someone is a very extreme example of having a corrupted nature, and to actually murder is a very extreme example of a sinful act. Most of us are not that messed up; but to whatever degree we are messed up is the degree to which we are vulnerable to the influence of evil. This is one reason we all need to be immersed in Christian community, so that we receive the love, encouragement, and teaching we need to pursue a life of purpose instead of a life immersed in sin. When we neglect to walk in the ways that God revealed – not sacrificially giving to the poor, not walking in faith, not loving God more than what the world has to offer, telling lies, feeding our lusts and compulsions, becoming dependent on substances, pursuing superstitions or occult practices, or allowing ourselves to despise others – we effectively are choosing to join the rebellion. Because we choose to follow the ways of Satan instead of the ways of God, we inadvertently strengthen the influence of evil in the world. With the encouragement of demons, a corrupted mind, isolation from Christian community, and the ability to choose freely, a young man in Newtown took the lives of twenty-seven others and then his own.

Our free will rebellion and the existence of evil explain a lot, but we still have questions for God. God can hold the entire human race guilty for its sin and corruption, and God could rightly say that we have made our own problems, but even so we still have questions. If God is all knowing, then he knew this tragedy would happen when he created the universe. If God is all powerful, then he could have intervened to prevent the tragedy somehow. If God is good and sovereign, then he must have a plan, and yet somehow that plan must allow for tragedies like this to happen. The Bible encouragingly says that God turns even tragedy to good purpose, in that these trials will strengthen the faith of believers and many others will turn to God as a result of their grief. Most Christians believe that the children, dying before the age of reason, went immediately to Heaven. But these truths are not satisfying by themselves.

God does have a plan. Since the first rebellion by mankind, God has promised a savior who would defeat evil and reconcile mankind with God. Later prophecies called this savior “the Messiah” [or “Christ”]. Some prophecies talked about God delivering his people, while others said the human Messiah would be the deliverer. Now we know that the one God is triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; each distinct, yet of the same substance and together in complete unity. With Christmas, we celebrate the “incarnation,” which is that the Son came to earth to be born as a human being, to be the promised Messiah, named Jesus [“Yayshua” in Hebrew]. Jewish prophecy said that the Messiah would cleanse God’s people and make forgiveness possible. This is God’s solution to our individual sin rebellion: if we believe in the identity of Jesus as both the divine Son of God and the human Messiah [or Christ] and we believe that he paid the penalty for our sins on the cross [as he said he would do], then we will be declared righteous in God’s sight, forgiven of our sins, and over time cleansed of our corrupted nature.

The Messiah also is God’s answer to the evil in the world. When Jesus walked the Earth, he confirmed the Jewish prophecies that the Messiah would deliver Israel from its oppression and the world from evil, but said that this would happen when he returned. In due time, Jesus will return, to resurrect the dead, judge each person, and send Satan and his demons into eternal punishment. Then there will be renewal, a new creation as it were, and the Earth and humanity will be restored to the state God intended for it, and those of us who believe in this promise will enjoy eternal life with God. So why a period between the first advent [or “coming”] of Christ and the second? And why was there so long a period before Christ came the first time? We can never fully understand God and his ways, but the Bible reveals that these time periods do have a purpose in God’s plan. Our struggles help us to come to faith and to see our need for God’s salvation and deliverance. They also give us an opportunity to take a stand for righteousness over sin and for good over evil, and thus to prove our faith and to serve for God.

Nothing I could write would lessen the grief of those who lost loved ones in this and other tragedies. But understanding why tragic things happen can help us to walk in faith and obedience and to trust in God’s ultimate deliverance of the world and of ourselves. The Bible makes clear that good people will suffer in this life. But we can have hope and joy even amidst our grief – and we can share that hope and joy with others – because we know that Christ has come to offer us salvation now [the reason we celebrate Christmas], and we trust that he will return to completely deliver us from sadness and pain, when he brings justice and righteousness to the Earth. It is only natural to feel grief and anger about what has happened, because we live in the time between the two advents of Christ, and the world is not yet what it should be. But let us trust in the reality, goodness, and love of God. Evil will not triumph in the world, because Christ will return. And evil will not triumph in us, if we trust that Christ came to offer us saving grace. I pray God will bless you this year... Will Groben / www.groben.com