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Why Do Bad Things Happen?

Just a decade ago, on a blue-sky morning with most workers in their offices in downtown New York City, a U.S. jetliner crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center, some twenty stories from the top. Eighteen minutes later, another commercial jet slammed into the south tower, engulfing the upper floors in a gigantic ball of fire. Americans were stunned to learn that both planes had been hijacked by Arab Muslim extremists.

Billowing clouds of gray smoke churned across the ground surrounding the twin towers, and debris cascaded from above. Screaming in terror, people fled from the buildings, streaming into the streets as they ran to save their lives. Desperate and unable to escape the inferno, some people jumped to their deaths on the pavement below. One couple held hands as they jumped from the building.

STREETS STAINED WITH BLOOD

The graphic pictures of men and women fleeing the billowing smoke in terror, others disoriented, bloodied, and covered with soot, will forever remain etched in the minds of television

viewers. A mountain of mangled steel . . . body parts lying in the rubble . . . streets stained with blood. It was an unparalleled criminal act and tragedy.

About an hour after the assault on the World Trade Center, a third plane, also commandeered by hijackers, plunged into the Pentagon, killing all sixty-four passengers and six crew members, and at least 189 military personnel at the Pentagon. Terrorists had penetrated to the very heart of America, Washington, D.C. If America's capital isn't safe, what is safe? The terrorists achieved their goal of striking terror into the hearts of many.

A fourth hijacked plane, apparently intended for a strike on the White House and the president himself, crashed into a field one hundred miles from Pittsburgh, killing all on board. Brave passengers apparently had fought the hijackers; the plane dove wildly to the ground, but these heroes saved the nation from further grief by diverting the plane from Washington.

THE WHY QUESTION

Thousands were killed in these four criminal, terrorist acts. Yet each death represented an individual story: A missing husband . . . a mother gone . . . a father lost . . . a brother searching for his brother . . . a son, a daughter beginning a career . . . now gone. Unquestionably, many believers were killed in the devastation. Some believing father, mother died that day. Why did it happen?

Why do tragedies happen to Christians? Why were Christians included in this carnage? Why do bad things happen to God's people?

GRANDMOTHER'S STORY

We will seek answers to those questions in this book. But let's remember that most personal sufferings are not found at scenes of war or national emergencies. Unseen, unknown, in the quiet corners of homes and hospitals, many Christians suffer tragedy and heartache.

Even though I was only a young boy, I remember my grandmother well. She was the picture of peacefulness and tranquility. She would sit by the window, the Bible on her lap, watching the activity outside; she would play checkers or other little games with her grandchildren. But perhaps the thing I remember most about her was her uncomplaining spirit. I never heard her speak a negative word; harsh, critical words were not part of her vocabulary or thoughts. On the contrary, she was thankful for the smallest things, for the proverbial “cup of water.”

The grace of God and the peace of Christ enveloped her life; she had discovered the secret of submission to the sovereign will of God, and she lived in quiet assurance because of it. Her submission impressed me most because of all the pain and loss she had endured.

Humanly speaking, many bad things had happened to Oma. She was born in a Mennonite home and community in the Ukraine, near the Dnieper River. Because of religious persecution, her parents had migrated to the Ukraine from Prussia. There the persecution that her family had experienced would continue. When the communist revolution occurred in 1917, many Mennonites were brutally murdered and their farms confiscated.

During those tragic, bloody years, my grandmother buried two husbands and nine of her ten children. Life was difficult and bad things happened to good, God-fearing people. Typhoid fever, epidemics, murder—there were many causes for the suffering and death of the Mennonite families in addition to the brutalities caused by the communists. As I researched the family history, I was astonished to discover the untimely deaths of my grandmother’s children: Jacob the first, age ten; Peter, age thirty-one; David, age unrecorded; Johan, age one; Aganetha, age unrecorded; Anna the first, age one; Anna the second, age two; Jacob the second, age twenty; Isaak the first, infant.

My mind reeled. How could my grandmother cope with

tragedy after tragedy in her family? Why were these bad things happening to her?

In 1927, after living under Communism for ten frightening years, she was able to emigrate to western Canada with my parents. Oma settled in Morris, Manitoba, with her last remaining child, my father, and with his family.

Oma loved her family, and her love overflowed to the grandchildren. She interceded for them when they were going to be disciplined and wept for them when they were disciplined—and quietly slipped them a cookie or candy to soften the suffering. But all the while Oma had her own continuing adversity. Despite being in a land of peace and plenty, she suffered physically. My grandmother had an enlarged, ulcerated foot that refused to heal. I still remember the putrid smell of the sore. But never a complaint. Oma had discovered a simple trust in the sovereign plan of God—despite not understanding why bad things happen to God’s people.

WHY DID GRANDMOTHER BURY NINE CHILDREN?

Grandmother’s life, like the New York and Washington tragedies, raises a fundamental question: Why do bad things happen to God’s people? Why did my grandmother bury two husbands and nine children? Why was she forced to flee from her home and adopted country? Why did she suffer with an ailment that refused to heal? She was a God-fearing believer. Why did believers die in the destruction of the World Trade Center and in the attack on the Pentagon? Where was God in all of this? Is He in control?

Does the Bible explain why bad things happen to God’s people? As a pastor I visit people in the hospitals—Christians who have terminal cancer, heart attacks, limb amputations . . . the list is endless. How do we explain the tragedies of life that Christians experience? Is God in control over the bad things that happen to God’s people . . . or are the tragic events of this world simply blind, chance happenings?

Some say, “Everything happens for a reason.” Does it? Rather than be hopeful or fatalistic, let’s go to the ultimate source of truth and assurance, the Bible, to answer the question. God’s Word has much to say about tragedy, loss, and suffering. Join me as we address the question, “Does everything happen for a reason?”