



"Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth."
—A.W. Tozer

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March 12, 2005: One Year Later

Last Sunday marked the one-year anniversary of the horrific church shooting in Brookfield, Wisconsin. On that fateful day, Terry Ratzmann entered the rented, hotel meeting room and opened fire with a semiautomatic pistol. A minute later, 22 rounds had been fired, four people were wounded, and eight lay dead—including the shooter.

Even though this singular event directly affected only one church organization, impacting another in a minor way, it produced a shockwave that rippled through the entire Body of Christ. Where one member suffers, we all suffer ([1 Corinthians 12:26](#)). Church members everywhere were deeply sobered, and as the news settled in, it caused much reflection and searching contemplation. Hundreds—thousands—of *whys* were asked, but few answers were received.

As with many events in life, the answers to these questions probably will not be answered anytime soon—if they are answered at all. God's thoughts are infinitely higher than ours, and He does not always reveal to us His reasons for doing things ([Isaiah 55:8-9](#)). But there are some essential principles and patterns that [God](#) reveals in the Bible that can help us sort through calamities such as Brookfield.

During Jesus' ministry, He was asked why a tragedy occurred, and His answer is revealing:

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And [Jesus](#) answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." ([Luke 13:1-5](#))

Jesus perceived their thoughts, and even though they did not directly ask a question, Luke says He "answered them." It suggests that He took their unstated assertion—that those who died must have been particularly sinful—and countered it with the truth. In both of His examples, Christ plainly says

that those who died were *not* worse sinners. In both of the examples, He also redirects the focus back to the *individual* and the *individual's* relationship with God and *away* from the speculation about why it happened to those specific people.

This is easily applied to the shootings of last year. Were those who were killed or wounded worse sinners than the rest of us in the church? Did the Brookfield congregation experience this calamity because it is somehow more sinful than other congregations? We have not been given *any* indication that is so.

Notice that Christ does not deny that [sin](#) was involved in some way. In fact, He clearly implies that sin *was* involved in the examples He gave, because both times He said to *repent*. [Repentance](#) is only necessary when there is sin. Again, we can apply this to the current church situation. [Proverbs 26:2](#) says that the "curse causeless does not come." God had a cause, a reason, for what He allowed. It is safe to say that the basic reason for what He allowed was *sin*—somewhere. But we need to be careful about deciding *which sin* or *whose sin* was the cause. In Luke 13, Christ's response was to get his listeners' focus off the details of the immediate calamity and on to each listener's personal standing with God. The details that we should be concerned with are those of our own walk with God.

Mankind has a tremendous propensity to resolve problems in his mind by assigning blame. Once we have placed the blame, we can go about our lives without having to delve any deeper. However, because of our inclination toward self-centeredness, we frequently focus on the wrong things. As an example, if one were to ask the average man on the street about the causes of September 11, 2001, the answer would probably be about Osama bin Laden, al Qaida, and/or Islamic terrorism. We have placed those events in a box and labeled it, "Not our fault." Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson found out quickly that America does not want to contemplate its own culpability, or its own sinfulness, as the reason God allowed that calamity. It is far easier to place the blame on terrorism than to think that God may have been displeased with us and the rampant immorality in this "Christian" nation.

If we took a poll of church members regarding why the church is in a scattered condition, the responses would be more varied. But how many would answer that God's pattern is to scatter His people because of sin, and that *each* member bears a measure of responsibility? How many would answer that the scattering happened because of complacency in our relationship with God? Our human nature shies away from accepting blame. It is easier to wrap our minds around cataclysmic events if we can assign the blame far from ourselves.

Christ's response in Luke 13 teaches us not to get caught up in the sordid details of the tragedy, but to look to our own houses and our own standing before God. Just as September 11 should have been a wake-up call for the nation to check itself, any calamity—especially one that impacts the church so strongly—should cause us to evaluate our own ways. Given that these events were allowed by God to get our attention, the conclusion is that our attention has been on the wrong things. Our attention has been drawn away from God, and so God allowed this jolt so that we might consider our ways and make sure we are, in fact, following Him.

Calamities, if properly responded to, should initiate an examination of our relationship with God. It should prompt us to gauge how clearly we see Him and help us to identify where we are falling short. Our response should not be one of finger-pointing or presuming that we know the sum of God's thoughts and have searched out *all* of His ways. Our response should be to evaluate our own houses and consider our own ways. It is only when we recognize our spiritual needs that we will take steps to have them filled ([Matthew 5:6](#)).

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Examining God's Judgments](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Judgment includes the actual process of handing down a decision. In this aspect of judgment, sanctification and purification bring about a restoration or refreshing in which liberty and reconciliation is restored. The seven reconciliations, or regatherings include: (1) Judah and Jesus Christ, (2) Israel and Judah, (3) Israel, Assyria, and Egypt, (4) All nations, (5) Man and nature, (6) Families, and (7) Ultimately God and mankind. We can accelerate this process by fearing God and keeping his commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Divine Warning](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

God often works through disasters, natural and manmade, letting His people know His displeasure with their sins. John Ritenbaugh argues that the terrorist attacks of September 11 are a divine warning, especially to His church, to return speedily to a right relationship with Him.

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