

Innocent Victims?

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We have all heard it in conversation or in radio and television news reports, or perhaps we have read it in newspaper or magazine articles. A tragedy occurs when a tornado, hurricane, drive-by shooting, robbery, gas explosion, lightning strike or any other chance occurrence causes some or many to lose their lives. Sadness, pity, frustration, anger or disgust is expressed by witnesses and family members as they refer to the "innocent victims" randomly caught in the tragic event.

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12 sheds some light on circumstances like these:

I returned and saw under the sun that—the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. For man also does not know his time: like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them.

The Word of God clearly acknowledges that men, even those seemingly well-deserving, will meet with unforeseen, chance setbacks, including death! This may not seem just. It may be worrisome to contemplate and very painful to experience, but we are admonished through Solomon that such things *will* occur. Such possibilities must be part of our thinking if we are going to face the trials of life in a mature manner that will glorify our Father in heaven.

A closer examination of this in God's Word, however, reveals that in reality *there are no innocent victims!* There are victims who did not trigger the tragedy that brought about a sudden and unexpected death. In that sense they are innocent. But who can stand before God and say, "I am pure and do not deserve death"?

"There Is None Who Does Good"

Earlier, Solomon says, "For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin" (Ecclesiastes 7:20). His father, David, writes in Psalm 14:2-3:

The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. They have all turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one.

These verses are a stinging indictment of each of us! The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), and God, as the Sovereign Ruler of His creation, has every right to execute that penalty—or allow it to occur—on anybody at any time He deems appropriate. And in so doing He is perfectly just.

On some occasions in the Bible, God executed the death penalty with dramatic and terrifying suddenness. He struck down the sons of Aaron, probably with bolts of lightning, when they offered profane fire on the incense altar (Leviticus 10:1-7). God cut Uzza down when he stretched out his

hand to steady the ark which David was bringing to Jerusalem on a cart (I Chronicles 13:5-10). In the New Testament, Ananias and Sapphira fell dead at Peter's feet after lying about their offering (Acts 5: 1-11).

In each case their sin was directly and quickly connected to their death, giving vivid testimony of what God has every right to do. The only difference between these events and other seemingly random occurrences is the time lag. God can claim our lives for **any** unrepented sin.

Were we aware that sin of any kind is that serious?

In Luke 13:1-5, Jesus took advantage of two local tragedies to make the point that, in a major way, all sins and all sinners are equal:

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."

The incident of the collapsed tower was in all likelihood a time and chance accident. However, Jesus alluded to those who died as being sinners, and He inferred that those in His audience were also sinners who deserved to die—and would, unless they repented.

What I find interesting is a possible reason why Jesus responded as He did to their report of Pilate's action. He seems to have detected in their attitude that they thought that those killed by Pilate deserved to die! The victims were sinners who "got what was coming to them," implying that they themselves were righteous. Jesus' replies that they were just as guilty as those who died! Someone's sudden and violent death is not proof that he is particularly more wicked than others.

Extremes of Judgment

Jesus' point is that, while it is not our responsibility to judge the degree of sinfulness of those who die suddenly and violently, it presents us with a golden opportunity to meditate on the state of our character and standing before God. We may be in just as much danger as those we regard as being very wicked!

We live in a world that is given to extremes of judgment. I began this article with people calling victims of a random tragedy "innocent," when the Bible shows no such human being exists. They are only innocent of causing the calamity that brought about the sudden end of their life. The other extreme is that human nature has a propensity to judge that those killed in such a circumstance were in reality great and wicked sinners who got what they deserved. This suggests that those making this determination are in good standing with God.

Ours is a topsy-turvy world. We desire with all our being for things to go "right." We want good to be rewarded and evil to be punished. But we find in places like Psalms 37 and 73 that evil men often prosper, live in peace in lovely homes, wear fine clothing, are surrounded by their families, receive acclaim and honors within the community and die at a good old age. Conversely, the righteous suffer

afflictions, are unappreciated, persecuted, demeaned, dishonored, reviled, scattered and perhaps even cut off in the prime of life!

Some things involving life, judgment and the out-working of God's purpose are simply beyond our knowing. We also have a very difficult time correctly judging the intent of another person's heart. Thus, God cautions us to be careful.

But He expects us to be able to judge the intent of *our own* heart correctly. We should know what is going on inside. So often, though, even in this we allow ourselves to deny the evil of our own motivations. We proudly justify ourselves by thinking, "God won't mind. It's just a 'little' sin that won't hurt anybody. And, besides, I need to do this." Is there really innocence in this kind of thinking?

God says in Jeremiah 17:9-10:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

Clearly, there is something radically wrong with man. The Bible discloses the seat of man's problem as being his heart, his inner being, including his reason. We are full of falsehood, duplicity and contradiction. We conceal and disguise ourselves from ourselves.

Perhaps it is in this area that the heart performs its most destructive work; it conceals the exceeding sinfulness of sin and its tragic consequences and seriousness. It deceives us into thinking that it is not so bad or that God is so merciful that He will overlook it. Was it this kind of thinking that preceded the sudden deaths of Aaron's sons, Uzza, Ananias and Sapphira?

Do you suppose He can overlook an attitude that so casually takes for granted sinful acts that caused the horribly painful and ignominious death of One who was truly innocent, His Son? Does He merely ignore an attitude that cares so little for its own life that it deliberately attempts to bring that wonderful gift of life to an end? Does He just avert His eyes when we do something that forms a part of our character that will prevent us from being in His image? Some people seem to think so, but is there innocence in this kind of reasoning?

Our own heart deceives us into taking sin lightly. But, believe the Bible, God is **NOT** taking sin lightly because He loves His creation. Sin has caused all the emotional and physical pain and death that mankind has experienced since Adam. Each of us is suffering to some degree from it right at this moment. Does this bring us happiness? Do we love sin so much that we want it to continue? Are we fully aware it may destroy us? Do we want our sinful way of life to end?

There is only one way it will end, and that is to follow Jesus' advice: "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish." When we repent and begin controlling ourselves so that we do not sin, it will not stop sin in the world. But unless **WE** stop sinning, sin will never be stopped. **EACH PERSON** has to come to see that he is personally responsible for stopping sin in his own life. He cannot wait for others to stop before he stops. The government will not do it for him. Nobody but the individual can stop his sinning unless God takes away the person's chance to repent by putting him to death.

We cannot allow ourselves to be deceived into taking this casually as the world does. They say, "Everybody's doing it." Millions cheat on their spouses. Who knows how many have literally "gotten

away with murder"! Many cheat the government of their income taxes and never get caught. But we cannot cheat God. How could we escape the gaze of a Being so acutely aware of what is happening that He sees even a sparrow falling? David writes, "Where can I go from Your Spirit?" (Psalm 139: 7). God not only sees the acts, but discerns what is "going on" in the heart (verses 1-4, 23-24). This thought is also contained in the New Testament:

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

Depending on our motivation, God's ability to "see" into our heart can be either good or bad. He will see whether our sin was one of weakness, whether we went down fighting with all our being, or whether we just casually gave in to a self-centered impulse and deliberately proceeded along the course of sin (James 1:12-16).

There are no truly innocent victims before God. We have all sinned and deserve the death penalty. But through our Father's graciousness and our Elder Brother's sacrifice, we have received forgiveness and the liberty to do things right. He has given us entrance into His presence where *no sin dwells*. No, not one iota of it! Let's not take God's grace casually. Let's fight sin with a seriousness that strives to match God's seriousness.

God advises us in Amos 5:14, "Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken." All of us want to be in God's Kingdom and live as He does, eternally and free from the anxieties this world and the flesh impose. God lives without sin. A sinner will not only be unwelcome in God's Kingdom, he will be just as totally out of place as Satan is in the presence of holiness. Turn your life into a crusade dedicated to doing good. Never allow yourself to be deceived into accepting the lie that a little sin does not matter.