

Coping with Trauma & Loss

*A Special help for Congregations**



The devastation in Florida during the 2004 Hurricane season and the weeks of stress as storms formed in the Atlantic and moved slowly and arbitrarily toward land may result in a prolonged recovery time for residents of Florida, their families and friends. Repair of buildings and structures will likely be completed long before the psychological scars of the people heal.

Although the specific agencies and organizations will vary from community to community, disaster relief organizations, the American Red Cross, pastors, counselors and therapists, FEMA professionals and others who are skilled in helping people cope with stress and traumatic situations should be identified and utilized.

After a disaster people may function in "crisis mode," that is, adrenaline keeps them working at a furious pace. While this high level of activity may be very helpful – there is much to do – it is also an effective way of delaying the

emotional effect of the reality of the disaster. One should not assume that feelings of numbness and high energy mean that one is immune from emotional impact.

These resources are designed to explain some of the psychological issues that surface for individuals during a disaster, provide information to help identify individuals who need professional help, give coping strategies and suggest ways that congregations can help one another through the aftermath of a natural disaster.

The sections are:

1. **Coping with Loss: The Stages of Grief**
2. **Trauma Related Stress**
3. **Suggestions for Congregations**
4. **Why Do the Righteous Suffer? – Sermons from Presbyterian Pastors**
5. **Helping Children Cope with Disaster**
6. **Additional Resources for Coping with Loss and Traumatic Stress**

Coping with Loss

All those who experience and survive a disaster suffer loss. They suffer loss of safety and security, loss of property, loss of community, loss of status, loss of beauty, loss of health, or loss of a loved one. Following a disaster, all individuals begin a natural and normal recovery process through mourning and grief.

At times loss involves a person, however, it can also be a pet, an object to which we are very attached, or a value we have held dear. In the grieving process, the connection with what we have lost is more important than the lost object, itself.



The experiencing of loss is emotional, however, often physical and observable symptoms or actions result. Some of the typical ways our bodies cope with trauma and stress follow. While these responses are typical, if they linger, they may be a signal that professional help is needed.

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation; difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Feeling emotionally "numb," withdrawn, disconnected or different from others.
- Nightmares and reoccurring thoughts about the event
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless and unable to make decisions
- Experiencing memory problems including difficulty in remembering aspects of the trauma.
- Feeling irritable, easily agitated, or angry and resentful.
- Changes in eating patterns; loss of appetite or overeating
- Spontaneously crying, feeling a sense of despair and hopelessness
- Feeling extremely protective of, or fearful for, the safety of loved ones.
- Feeling guilt - unrealistically - that you were not able to prevent the disaster or that you survived or were less harmed than others.
- Headaches, back pains and stomach problems
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs

Grieving a Loss

Grief is the process of working through all the thoughts, memories and emotions associated with that loss, until an acceptance is reached – allowing the person to place the event in proper perspective. Theories of stages of grief resolution provide general guidelines about possible sequential steps a person MAY go through as he or she accepts the event. These theories provide general guidelines, each person must grieve according to his or her own values and time line.

It is important to remember that not all people move through the stages with the same intensity of emotions, or at the same rate. These differences in how and when individuals experience each stage can add stress to relationships. For example, a husband who is in the anger stage may be

very impatient with a wife who is still in denial: "I can't understand why she's still got her head in the sand." She, on the other hand, may be wondering: "Why is he so angry when there's nothing to be angry about?"

The Five Stages Of Grieving

Shock/Denial: "No, not me, it can't be true." This is a typical reaction when a person faces a loss. This stage functions as a buffer after the unexpected happens. It allows you to collect yourself and, in time, to find a way to cope.

Denying a loss helps us protect ourselves when something painful happens. But getting stuck in denial can be dangerous. Pretending the crisis hasn't happened or won't happen encourages you to delay finding a solution to urgent problems. To deal with denial, individuals and families must talk about their situation realistically and openly. This may mean sharing fears and tears. Dealing with loss is easier on everyone when you can talk about it.

Anger: "Why me?" When the first stage of denial passes, it is likely to be replaced by anger, rage, envy, and resentment. God is often a target for anger, especially in natural disasters. You may also resent people around you who didn't suffer as much loss as you did.

Bargaining: "Yes, me, but...." Once you have gotten the anger under control, you may enter the bargaining stage. You may promise God that you'll be good or that you'll do something in exchange for what you need. Bargaining can be a positive way to deal with stress. Whether you bargain with God, with yourself, or with your family, it provides comfort for things you cannot control. It allows you to "frame" the crisis so you can manage it. Bargaining may help you cope with feelings of sadness without experiencing deep depression. Good bargaining skills allow people to see the bright side of even the most difficult situation.

Depression: "There is no hope." A crisis entails loss, which is followed by sadness. If you are absorbed by the sadness, you can become depressed. Signs of depression include: changes in usual eating or sleeping patterns, constant moodiness or irritability, lack of energy, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Acceptance: "It's all right now." Once the preceding stages have been completely worked through, you will finally be able to accept what has happened, and you may even be stronger than you were before the disaster occurred.

Tips for Coping

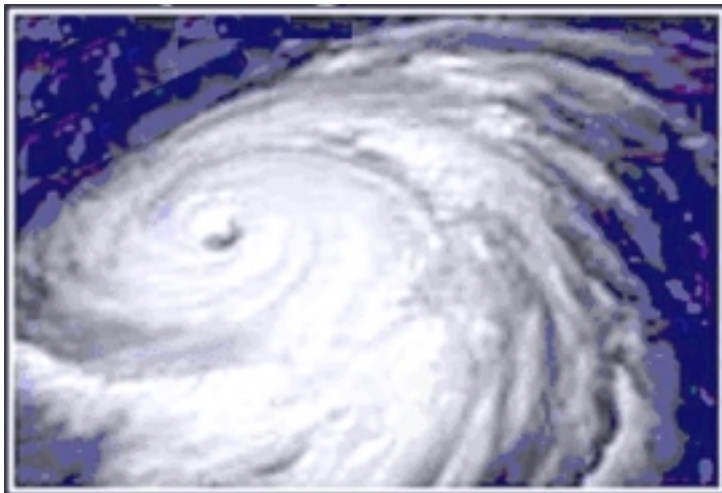
It is 'normal' to have difficulty managing your feelings after major traumatic events. However, if you don't deal with the stress, it can be harmful to your mental and physical health. Here are some tips for coping in these difficult times:

- **Talk about it.** By talking with others about the disaster event, you can relieve stress and realize that others share your feelings.
- **Spend time with friends and family.** They can help you through this tough time. If your family lives outside the area, stay in touch by phone or e-mail, if that is possible. If you have any children, encourage them to share their concerns and feelings about the disaster with you.

- **Take care of yourself.** Get rest and exercise, and eat properly as far as possible. If you smoke or drink coffee, try to limit your intake, since nicotine and caffeine can also add to your stress. Be careful about your alcohol intake as well.
- **Limit exposure to images of the disaster.** Watching or reading news about the event over and over again will only increase your stress.
- **Find time for activities you enjoy.** Read a book, go for a walk, catch a movie or do something else you find enjoyable. These healthy activities can help you get your mind off the disaster and keep the stress in check.
- **Take one thing at a time.** For people under stress, an ordinary workload can sometimes seem unbearable. Pick one urgent task and work on it. Once you accomplish that task, choose the next one. "Checking off" tasks will give you a sense of accomplishment and make things feel less overwhelming.
- **Do something positive for others.** Give blood, prepare "care packages" for people who have lost relatives or their homes or jobs, or volunteer in a rebuilding effort. Helping other people can give you a sense of purpose in a situation that feels 'out of your control.'
- **Avoid drugs and excessive drinking.** Drugs and alcohol may temporarily seem to remove stress, but in the long run they generally create additional problems that compound the stress you were already feeling.
- **Ask for help when you need it.** If your feelings do not go away or are so intense that they interfere with your ability to function in daily life, talk with a trusted relative, friend, doctor or spiritual advisor about getting help. Make an appointment with a mental health professional to discuss how well you are coping with the recent events. You could also join a support group. Don't try to cope alone. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness.

The emotional impact and feelings connected to a disaster may remain beneath the surface until another crisis brings the emotions out into the open. Many individuals may be surprised by an increase in emotionality around the third month, sixth month, and one-year anniversaries of the event. Crisis intervention can assist victims and facilitate their progress in proceeding through the predictable phases of loss and grief, thus avoiding surprise reactions or emotional paralysis later.

Trauma Related Stress



Expression of stress related feelings tends to be on a continuum of sorts. When the feelings associated with loss seem to linger, seem to be extremely intense, when one's life does not return to normal, the person may be experiencing a condition requiring professional help.

The clinical term associated with the psychological impact of disaster and uncertainty is Trauma-related Stress. Individuals who have survived in the midst of a traumatic event often suffer psychological stress related to the incident. In most instances, these are normal reactions to

abnormal situations and they subside over time. It is critically important that people who feel they are unable to regain control of their lives, or who experience the following symptoms for more than a month, seek professional mental health assistance.

What is Trauma-Related Stress?

Stress, anxiety and depression are all normal feelings - reactions to a disaster. However, if symptoms connected with these feelings do not subside within a month, something more serious - a Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) - may be likely. PTSD includes a group of distressing symptoms that sometimes occur following a disaster or fear-producing event. The event, called a stressor, is a situation in which a person has been physically injured, has been threatened with death or bodily injury, or has witnessed the death or injury of someone else. By definition, the trauma must cause a strong experience of intense fear, horror or helplessness. Natural disasters (tornadoes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions) are common PTSD stressors.

An individual who has been exposed to a severe traumatic experience, may begin to experience the following types of symptoms.

Acute Stress Disorder: ASD is the most common response. Symptoms of ASD include: numbness, difficulty responding to normal life events, difficulty with anger and suspiciousness. These symptoms will be present close to the experience of the traumatic event.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: PTSD may present later. Symptoms include repeatedly re-experiencing the ordeal in the form of flashback episodes, memories, nightmares or frightening thoughts, especially when exposed to events or objects reminiscent of the trauma. Emotional numbness and sleep disturbances are also common symptoms, as are depression, substance abuse, heightened anxiety and irritability. Headaches, gastrointestinal complaints, immune system problems, dizziness, chest pain or discomfort in other parts of the body are potential signs. People who already live with PTSD are at risk of more prominent flashbacks, anxiety and hypervigilance as a result of recent events.

Substance Abuse and Addictions: People may start or overuse substances such as alcohol, food and drugs, and increase gambling and other addictive behaviors to manage their anxieties and other symptoms. The most important clue to watch for is whether the person's usual consumption or behavior has changed.

Depression and Anxiety: These disorders may develop or increase as a result of the trauma. It will be necessary to assess all patients whether they have been previously diagnosed or not. If patients are presently being treated for these disorders, it will be necessary to determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of current treatment. Depression and grief are separate issues, but grief can cause concern when it lasts for an extended period of time.

Domestic Abuse: Research has shown that domestic abuse cases rise after traumatic events. Be alert for bruises and other signs of violence on adults and children.

Overwhelming Guilt: Following traumatic events, guilt may be a complicated part of traumatic response; it is among the symptoms associated with more pronounced traumatic reactions. Guilt may intensify or complicate trauma and/or grief reactions. It also may result in hopelessness, depression and other problems such as self-harm, suicidal feelings, and substance abuse. Resolution and acting in the best interest of both the guilt-ridden and the offended may require the help of a skilled individual (e.g., therapist, clergy or, in some cases, a wise friend).

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a serious condition and should be treated by a professional. The prognosis for recovery with treatment is very good.

Suggestions for Congregations

Depending upon the magnitude of the event, getting congregational groups together may be more or less difficult. If there is opportunity, holding customary services – as well as a special service that allows congregation members to share their response to the disaster – are very important.

Take care of safety needs

Depending upon the severity of the disaster, some members and their homes may fare better than others. If possible without placing them in danger, mobilize a committee who can check on members. The most vulnerable members should be contacted first.

Crisis Intervention

Assessing capacity to live independently, evaluating suicide and dangerousness risk, giving reassurance, building hope, protocols for immediate response, procedures for consultation, referral, and follow-up should be started as quickly as possible.

Remember the caregivers

If you have family caregivers in your congregation, their tasks will be increased exponentially during a disaster. Caring for their loved one while attempting to cope with the inconveniences and emergencies of a disaster can be devastating.

Gather often as a Community

A congregation is an important community. Congregation members who have suffered disaster will look to the church for support. Use whatever resources are accessible to check on members who are isolated or alone. Encourage them to come together and experience the sense of safety emanating from the group. When people do come together, provide a calm, reassuring, nonjudgmental atmosphere in which they can speak honestly and be heard.

Pray

Offer prayer as a means for people to connect and share the pain of the disaster with God and one another. Congregation members may need or request guidance from church leaders in the appropriate way to pray at this emotionally sensitive time.

Listen actively

Using nonverbal cues, giving minimal encouragements, conveying empathy, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, summarizing, differentiating content, and feelings. Say things that encourage the person to keep talking: "Tell me more about that." "How do you feel about that?" "I can see this bothers you." "How can I help you resolve this?" Unfortunately, family members and friends are often poor listeners, not because they don't care, but because they want to make things better, to give advice, to solve the problem. Instead, follow these rules of good listening.

Question

Interviewing techniques, asking open and closed questions, focusing with questions, avoiding using questions to give advice or make judgments.

Provide Support and Encouragement

Establishing rapport, empowering the survivor, giving positive feedback about coping strengths, offering suggestions, avoiding communication blocks, and unhelpful phrases are important aspects of support.

Make asking for help acceptable

People who have a hard time working through a loss may brush off offers of assistance and persist in the fantasy that everything is fine. Offer help frequently, mentioning that others have received help, also.

Talk about Righteous Anger

As people grieve the losses that accompany disaster, anger is typically expressed. There is no better place than a church for the difficult question of "Why?" to be addressed.

Make Specific Plans

Healing rarely happens without planning and effort. Think about what you personally can do, what your congregation can do, what your congregational volunteers and other caregivers can do. Encourage people to do what they can, to care in ways they have been trained or gifted to help.

Plan special services

Gather for special worship services of healing and remembrance. Let people come in touch with their suffering and offer it to God. Invite people to look to God for help and hope-in the worshiping community, in word and sacrament, and in symbol and music.

Encourage members of the congregation to take care of themselves by:

Getting a good night's sleep

Eating healthy foods, avoiding alcohol, caffeine, and junk foods

Exercising, even if it is just taking a short walk every day

Finding something enjoyable to do with family (particularly if there are small children) each day

Taking a moment and do something by himself/herself that he/she finds relaxing each day

Sharing time with friends

Staying connected with the church community

Why Do the Righteous Suffer? – Sermons from Presbyterian Pastors

The following three sermons are used here with the gracious permission of the writers. Each in a unique and personal way deals with the question that often arises from the anger following a tragedy, disaster or seemingly merciless event – “How can a loving God allow this to happen?”



Why do bad things happen to good people?*

Reverend William Weisenbach
First Presbyterian Church of Katonah (New York)

Scriptural Reference: Luke 13:1-9

Why do bad things happen to good people? I promise not to bring up our son Mathew's death, some six weeks ago now, in every sermon, but today's text cry's out for, at least, some reflection on this critical question. You see, Matthew was a good person and Cynthia and Emily are good people and most of the time I am a good person, yet Matthew died in one of those freak incidents that affect fewer than 200 people a year out of the millions with seizure disorders. And it wasn't just Matthew. Not quite two years ago my brother David lost his 24-year-old daughter in an almost identical way and he continues to ask the same question. Where were you, God? Why, God? Why me? Why do bad things happen to good people?

These are the same questions that Jesus is asked today. Why, Jesus? Why were those particular Galileans murdered by Pilate in an act of terrorism? Were they bad people? Were their sins greater than other people's sins? Why, Jesus? And why were those eighteen innocent people killed when the Tower at Siloam toppled onto an unsuspecting crowd? Had those folks done something particularly awful that led God to punish them? Each one of us here today could probably add our own examples. Why, God? Why does my father—or my brother—or my husband—as good a man as you are going to find—why does he have terminal, terrible, tyrannical cancer? Why, God? Why did my grandchild die before she was even six months old? Was it my fault? Was I being punished? Why, God? Why did my job get eliminated? Why did I end up in such a dysfunctional family? Why did my child get mixed up with the wrong crowd? Why, God? Why did all those bombs go off in Madrid killing nearly 200 innocent souls? Were those people picked through some sort of divine lottery to endure tragedy and injury and death? Jesus, come on. Tell me, tell us, why?

When Jesus answers these questions this morning we hear both good news and bad news. The good news is simple, you don't suffer and the people you love don't suffer because of your or their sin. God doesn't cause bad things to happen to good people. God is not the Great Disciplinarian in the sky, punishing us for our mistakes, judging us for our ignorance, blaming us for our imperfections, reminding us of our misjudgments. But, having delivered this good news, Jesus counter punches with what sounds like bad news, or at least very troubling news. God doesn't punish us or make us suffer arbitrarily. BUT, Jesus says, if you do not repent, you, too will perish, like the unfortunate victims of Pilate, like the unlucky corpses buried under the ruins of Siloam. Now, what, I wonder, did Jesus mean by these words?

In his best selling book of years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner, tries to figure out why bad things happen to good people. Specifically he tries to figure out why he and his wife, fierce and faithful Jews, lost their thirteen year old son to progeria, that devastating disease that ages a body over night and leads to painful and premature death. Kushner's answer to this basic question about suffering is interesting. He decides that God cannot be both all-powerful and all loving. His argument goes something like this. If God really is all-powerful, then God really is responsible for all the suffering and agony in the world. Such a God, for Rabbi Kushner, is unimaginable. His answer, then, is that God is not all-powerful. This all loving, always compassionate God is unable to prevent suffering and pain. Instead, God chooses always to be with us in the midst of the agony, sharing the pain of what a powerless God has been unable to prevent. Kushner's answer is intriguing. But from a Christian perspective, he doesn't go quite far enough.

If you think about it, Jesus was the personification of Kushner's question. Why did the worst thing of all happen to this very best person? Yet, both in his words this morning, and surely in his example on the cross, Jesus refuses to honor or answer the question why? You see, for him, the why is not important. In the mind and experience of Jesus, bad things just happen. In a world shaped by God's creativity, freedom is central to the energy of that creativity. And freedom means that God gives up some control and power, not because God is impotent, but because God is loving. In other words, an all-powerful God allows evil and suffering in order to preserve the freedom of creation. Bad things happen in the creative energy, the randomness, the freedom of natural law. Bad things happen in the perverse human freedom of moral law. And being true to the promise of freedom, God does not intervene. But that doesn't mean that God doesn't care. Or that God is absent. Far from it. In fact, fear and intrigue and jealousy and ambition end up nailing God to a cross. And what does God do? God embraces the suffering. God endures the suffering. God confronts the suffering. Then God transforms the suffering into the creativity of new life. The question is not "why do bad things happen to good people?" The question is, "how?" How do we live and how do we endure in a world where bad things simply happen?

This is why Jesus says, "Repent, or you will perish like they did." Repent means to turn. Turn away from the "why" question and turn toward the "how" question. Turn away from blaming, blaming those in authority, or blaming God, or blaming the victims. Instead, turn. Stay close. Stay close to God. Stay grounded and connected to God's grace. Because then when bad things happen, as it surely will for all of us, God can and will sustain you. God will hang from the cross of your tragedy, your doubt and your despair. God will weep with you. And God will never, never, abandon you. You will suffer. You will die. But you will not perish unloved and alone, when and if, you turn and stay close to God.

Jesus finishes this morning by telling the parable of the fig tree. He tells this story in order remind us just what kind of God we have. God is not like a landowner who rips us out and throws us away when we don't produce good fruit. No! Instead, God is like a wise and patient gardener who gives us a second and a third and a fourth chance to root ourselves in holy ways. This gardener God prunes, digs and fertilizes us. Then God waits, waits for the divine creativity in us to finally blossom into fruitful life for the world. Yes, far from a God who topples towers and murders innocent Galileans, our God is a gardener who has all the time in the world for us to grow into spiritual maturity and ripeness. And, who knows? In God's wisdom, the "bad things" that happen, the seemingly unfair pain and suffering and distress in the world, these "bad things," may just be the very things that give nourishment to our souls, that call us to accomplish things we never dreamed of doing.

To illustrate this point Kushner tells the story of Martin Gray, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Holocaust. Following the war, he married, raised a family, and became successful in business. But then, once again, tragedy struck in his life. One day his wife and children were all killed in a forest fire that swept through their home in south France. He was distraught after this senseless loss, and friends encouraged him to launch an investigation into how and why this horror had happened. Instead, Martin Gray began a passionate movement to protect nature from future fires. He explained to his friends that an investigation would focus only on the past, on issues of pain and sorrow and blame, on accusing other people of being responsible for his misery. He wasn't interested in asking "why?" He was only interested in asking "now what?" How can I live into the future, in life affirming, and not life denying ways? How can I live for something and not just against something?"

Today Jesus presents us with the central dilemma of Lent. Are we stuck in the past, or do we believe in the future? Are we living against something, or are we living for something? Do we want answers, or do we want God?

This day, Jesus is offering to lift us from our sea of sorrow, from our confusion, from our pain. Offering to lift us and turn us toward the mercy and grace of God. This is the Good News of the gospel.

May it be so, for you and for me this day and in the days and weeks to come.

Amen.

*Dr. Weisenbach credits Rev. Susan Andrews, Moderator of the 215th General Assembly for providing a portion of the basis for this sermon.

A Spoonful of Sugar

Reverend Beth Yarborough
Jonesborough Presbyterian Church (Tennessee)

Scriptural Reference - Job 1:1, 2:1-10 Job 23: 1-17

Every Sunday, in our morning worship, we reaffirm our faith using all or part of one of our confessions—usually the Apostles' Creed or, on Communion Sundays, the Nicene Creed. The first part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the Book of Confessions, which contains 11 formal statements of faith structured as creeds, confessions and catechisms. Elders throughout the denomination, training for leadership, study each of the confessions, its historical origins, and its theological emphases. Our candidates for ministry must demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the confessions on ordination exams and before their presbyteries.

In one of the confessions that we as Presbyterians hold dear is the Heidelberg Catechism. This confession was written centuries ago and in reading it, you might find some things that sound a little outdated in our contemporary times, but the fundamentals of the Heidelberg Catechism continue to influence our beliefs.

The opening line of A Brief Statement of Faith adopted by the Presbyterian Church USA in 1991 says, "In life and in death we belong to God." This affirmation echoes the first question and the first answer of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong body and soul, in life and in death B not to myself but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ.

We can certainly take some comfort in the knowledge that God is the God Almighty the Lord of all but the question remains. If our God is, in fact, the God Almighty and the Lord of all, surely, God is in a position to prevent bad things that happen to us. Yet, bad things do happen. Why? Why does God allow bad things to happen to us or as Harold Kushner put so well in his book of the same title, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?*

Job was a good person. We read that there was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. Not only are the words that describe Job clear about his character, in the ancient language of Hebrew, the way the words are paired together and put together emphasized, even more, his good character. Both God and Job's wife refer to him as one who persists in his integrity.

Job was top-notch, a class-act, yet Job was quickly stripped of everything - and even sitting in the ashes scratching his itchy, scaly skin with a piece of broken pottery, even when his wife asked him why he continued to live this life of integrity, Job said, Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the Bad? Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?

The Heidelberg Catechism again:

Q. (27) What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. God's providence is God's almighty and ever present power, whereby as with God's hand, God still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, the fruitful and the unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come not by chance but by God's loving hand.

Not by chance, but by God's hand - everything comes to us - the fruitful and the unfruitful years, our sickness and our health our riches and our poverty. All things come from God's hand.

Is that not what Job is affirming here? How can we receive the good that God gives and refuse the not-so-good that God gives?

When I was a little girl, I was plagued with frequent stomach aches. The remedy that my mother gave me was an old drug called paregoric, and I bet many of you have had paregoric in your life- it was really nasty. So she would mix it with a little bit of sugar to help it go down better, and to be honest, the sugar didn't help much. It reminds me of a song that was made popular by Dick Van Dyke and Julie Andrews in my all-time favorite Disney movie, Mary Poppins:

Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down
In a most delightful way.

Well, perhaps, some medicines go down easier with a spoonful of sugar, but in the case of paregoric, a whole cup of sugar did not help.

If we were to juxtapose Job's question, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" with "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down," does it mean that we are given good from God that then we are allowed suffering and pain and then somehow the good and the bad are supposed to be mixed together so that the pain is not quite so bad? Or, are we expected to muster up some kind of super-human strength and not feel the affect of the pain or the sorrow, because somehow in our thinking, the good mixes with the bad and everything becomes watered down to the point that our joy lacks luster and we trivialize our sorrow?

This is hard stuff to understand. Yes, good things do happen, and yes, bad things happen. But do we give equal attention to the good and bad realizing that somehow, somehow in the providence of a loving, sovereign God - somehow God allows all of this stuff to come our way so that God's purposes are realized?

I don't understand it, but we do try to figure it out, or trivialize it - or worse, turn against God completely like Job's wife advised him to do. Here he sat in his ultimate misery and his wife said, "Why don't you curse God and die?" Do we ever sound like Job's wife?

Have you ever said to someone in the midst of their suffering, "Don't worry, all things work out for good."? Or has someone ever said to you "God has a purpose for this horrible thing."? Sometimes the way we respond to each other's suffering is abominable. Talk about adding insult to injury. After all of the catastrophes that fell Job's way, his own friends, his own wife, asked him what horrible thing he'd done that he was being punished so. That was not punishment. God does not work that way.

A husband and a wife that I knew in South Carolina had one child, a daughter. On Thanksgiving Day she was driving home to spend the day with her parents. She was hit by a drunk driver and killed. My friend, Jeannie died at age 42 with cancer that struck with a vengeance and took her life in no time. Jeannie's only sibling, a sister, was killed 20 years prior in a traffic accident.

Do you think either of these mothers or fathers wanted to hear from somebody, "all things work for good," or "God had a purpose" or worse, "God needed an angel in Heaven?" No way! What they wanted to hear was for somebody to say, "I do not understand how this can happen to you and I do not understand how you stand the pain, but what I do understand is that I want to help you in your pain. I want to be with you when you hurt and I want to cry with you when you cry. I want to be with you when you finally realize that God carried you through carried you through the bad times as well as the good times."

Years ago many of my friends were having children. Several had miscarriages. One friend confided in me, "If another person says to me, 'Don't worry. You can get pregnant again and have another baby', I believe I'll scream." She did not want another baby – she wanted that baby and she needed for people to allow her to grieve for that baby.

What is it that makes it so hard for us to allow each other and ourselves to truly hurt? What is it that hinders us from going beneath the surface of what feels good - and feel the searing pain of loss? What is it that makes it so hard for us to be in pain for ourselves and with each other? Why do we feel like we have to trivialize our pain? Why are we so pressed to mix a spoonful of sugar with every mouthful of awful-tasting medicine?

There is a concern in our society in our inability to deal with death and suffering. Bill Moyers' series on Grief and Dying on Public TV several years ago is testimony to this very thing. Why is it so hard for us? Why do we so willingly reach out our hands and receive all the good things, but when the bad things come, we don't know what to do? And like Job's wife, we say, well, why don't you just turn against God? Or we trivialize the horror of the situation with trite, empty sayings like, "Something good will come out of it."

The very idea of Job's wife saying, "Why don't you curse God and die?" The nerve of his friends asking what terrible sin he committed? Why could they not just be there with Job in his pain?

Three years ago, my dad was in Hospice care for six months. Nurses and aides came in every day. We did not know how much longer he would be with us, but we could not talk about death there. I believe that my dad knew how sick he was. He did not think my mother knew so he was trying to protect her. My mother was aware of the gravity of his condition and thought he did not know and she was trying to protect him. So they were at this stand-off dancing around all the important issues. You of course, know the rest of the story – my dad won a reprieve against the liver disease and in between trips to the hospital to get his heart regulated – still goes to his law office every day.

But during that time in our house, like almost every house in our country, we couldn't deal well with death and dying. We did not know how to receive the good and receive the bad from the hand of God.

Q. What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence?

A. We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God that no creature, no thing on this earth, shall separate us from the love of God.

It is what we as Presbyterians have believed for centuries. It is what we continue to stake our faith on.

If only I had the answer to why bad things happen to good people. But I don't have the answer. I do believe, however, without the shadow of a doubt that nothing in this world can separate us from the love of God, the love of God that upholds us in the good times and in the bad times.

A spoonful of sugar, not even a whole bag of sugar, will help some of the medicine go down that we have to take. It can hurt and it can hurt badly. But do you think - could we - could you and I - could we together learn to put our arms around each other and cry together and finally come to the place where we will be able to look back and say, "Yes, God was there in the bad times, just as God was there in the good times?" Could you do that with me?

"You Asked for It: Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?"

Reverend Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church (Ohio)

Scriptural Reference: Romans 8

The question is as old as the advent of human beings on this planet. Perhaps some version of it was asked when a severe thunderstorm washed out all the crops, or when lightning struck a member of the community and killed him. Perhaps the cry went up when a seemingly healthy baby died in her sleep. We know that the covenant people of Israel lamented misfortune, particularly when it seemed in contrast to the experience of their heathen neighbors. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the righteous suffer?

The question is distinctly theological. In fact, it is easily dismissed if one does not believe the world to be ruled by a powerful, benevolent God. Apart from divine purpose, why shouldn't bad things happen to good people, just as they do to bad people? Life is a random mix of good and bad; the rain falls equally on the just and the unjust. The question is irrelevant outside an understanding of a good and gracious God. But when one affirms that, the question reveals a deep yearning for human experience to reflect God's character, and profound puzzlement when it doesn't.

Various explanations of the discrepancy between those two realities, and various attempts to harmonize them, have been postulated through the ages. This defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil is called "theodicy," and occupies a part of every systematic theology. You know these justifications: God uses suffering to get our attention, to

wake us up from complacency or unbelief, some propose. Others suggest that God uses suffering to teach us something. Many religious traditions have even viewed suffering as divine punishment for sins committed. Rabbi Harold Kushner was the author of the best-selling book 20 years ago that posed the question in the same form as the sermon topic does today. Written from the personal perspective of losing his son to a rare disease, he revealed the spiritual poverty of these conventional explanations. His book remains one of the most helpful in dealing with grief and loss, and I recommend it.

For none of these “theories” can really touch either the greatness of God or the depth of human suffering. They offer no comfort to those who cry out to heaven and feel the door is slammed in their face. Why do bad things happen to good people? is rarely asked theoretically, for the sole reason of intellectual enlightenment, but out of the depths of pain or the experience of God’s absence. As we consider this requested topic this morning, I invite you to bring your toughest questions, your deepest hurts, your unresolved issues to bear upon your hearing of God’s Word.

The reading from the letter to the Romans stands as the soaring climax to the intricate theological argument the apostle Paul has carefully laid out in preceding chapters. He has testified to the universality of sin and to God’s redeeming work in Jesus Christ as an atonement for human sin. But while this has been accomplished, sin--and all its miserable consequences--remains. If God has given us the glorious gift of salvation, why do bad things still happen to people who are trying to live right? In the face of this, how can we have hope? Listen for God’s Word in the reading from the 8th chapter of the letter to the Romans, beginning at the 18th verse: [ROMANS 8:18-28]

When I was seventeen years old and a senior in high school, a junior girl I knew well was critically injured in an automobile accident. Her family was very religious, and the church where they were members organized a 24-hour prayer circle at the hospital where she teetered between life and death. During the days immediately following the accident, at least two church members came to the hospital every hour to pray and wait with her family. After a week Geri died. I was angry with God because it seemed like a kick in the teeth, that God had not listened to their fervent prayers. I went to the funeral at her family’s church, wanting to hear some justification for God’s apparent inability or, worse, unwillingness to heal Geri. The minister read the words from the text we’ve just heard, and chose to focus on verse 28 for his sermon: We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according his purpose. In that packed sanctuary, filled with many high school students, the minister spoke about how there surely was a good purpose for Geri’s death; how she had been spared some of the temptations and suffering of young adulthood; how she was now in a far better place than this earth. He exhorted us to believe beyond what we could understand. His sermon provoked a crisis of faith in me that was not fully resolved until years later when my own father died. I was furious with God for working His purpose out through the heartbreak of His children. To arrange—or even permit—painful losses in order to bring about good seemed brutal and sadistic.

I’m older now, and few things seem so clearly “day” or “night” to me as they did then. I like to think that minister didn’t really say what I heard. But I hear versions of it often enough to know that it represents a perspective that many still hold. Following 9/11, an e-mail article made the rounds that suggested that this terrorist act occurred to punish a nation that had removed prayer in school, supported civil rights of homosexual persons, and legalized abortion. But I also see

evidence of it in more benign ways, such as when a church member feels the need to explain why he hasn't been in worship lately, and then asks me to put in a good word so that nothing bad will happen to him. He's joking, of course, but for many there is a direct correlation between our actions and the fortune (or misfortune!) that comes to us.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, are those who doubt that God micro-manages the universe at all. This perspective holds that it's useless to pray for safety in travel, for example. Accidents happen. God is not going to intervene if a jetliner malfunctions, or the driver of an automobile falls asleep at the wheel. God cannot be counted on to protect us from random misfortune.

Is there a middle ground? Can we affirm that God is both good and more powerful than evil? In a universe governed at least to some extent by the principle of uncertainty, can we also affirm a God who is steadfast and trustworthy?

The apostle Paul would answer a resounding "Yes." Though he was the greatest missionary evangelist, Paul suffered terribly: he was shipwrecked several times, beaten and imprisoned, and eventually martyred. Throughout his life he had some persistent condition from which he sought deliverance; a "thorn in the flesh" that troubled him, and for which he never did get relief. Yet Paul did not attribute these difficulties to God. He saw them as part of the inevitable consequence of living "in the meantime"—before the effects of salvation obtained in Jesus Christ have been fully realized on earth. He didn't deny the painful reality of loss, describing the creation and individuals as in bondage and "groaning" for redemption. He did, however, put that pain in the context of a world whose redemption was certain, but not yet complete. Consider how it is in the natural world: a storm can be devastating, with strong wind and torrential rain. The storm ceases, but there are still the wind damage and the flooding to deal with. I think that for Paul, evil is the storm whose back was broken in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Evil has been defeated, but we still have to deal with its consequences.

Even those consequences, however, are not apart from God's redemptive purposes. God doesn't "cause" babies to die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome; God does not intend for teenagers to die in car crashes; it is not God's will that tragedy strike people or nations. But none of these is outside God's power to redeem. Even this side of the grave, God can be powerfully present to comfort, and give hope. An anonymously written story tells of the only survivor of a shipwreck who was washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed fervently for God to rescue him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none seemed forthcoming. Eventually he managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect him from the elements. But then one day, after scavenging for food, he arrived home to find his little hut in flames, the smoke rolling up to the sky. The worst had happened; the man was furious. "God, how could you do this to me!" he lashed out. Early the next day, however, he was awakened to the sound of a ship that was approaching the island, coming to rescue him. "How did you know I was here?" he asked, amazed. They replied, "We saw your smoke signal." God can take our worst shipwrecks, the hottest fires, the freakiest accident, and even our most bitter anger--and transform it into something good.

We have precedent for that in Jesus, who took the very worst that human beings could offer: abandonment, betrayal, hatred, jealousy, and all the rest, and absorbed it into his very being, in

order to stop it, once and for all. The buck stops there, on the cross. The power of evil has been overcome. The empty cross stands in silent testimony that all things do work together for good... for God's ways are not our ways.

Did you hear in the text the source of the apostle's confidence about how we can live in this transitional time? The Spirit of God helps us when we don't even know how to pray, when words cannot express our feelings, and when no solution even seems possible. The Spirit intercedes for us "with sighs too deep for words." If you have ever wondered what to say to a person grieving a hard loss, maybe this can give some insight: sometimes words just won't do it. Your silent presence, your own tears, your support by "being there" speaks volumes about the hope that comes from divine intercession.

For me personally, "all things work together for good" didn't make much sense until my mother and my siblings were choosing scripture readings for my father's memorial service. She wanted to include that verse. I balked, remembering my friend Geri's service. But my mother pressed, saying we had to read further than verse 28 in order to understand how things could possibly work out for good now. It's okay to be mad, she concluded. Or sad. Or confused. Or cynical and unbelieving. And then she continued reading Romans 8 aloud: Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through the One who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Not all my questions were answered, that day or ever. Even though many years have passed, I still miss my dad. But I know something else, deep in my heart. The love of God has overcome death, is stronger than evil, and is far more purposive than chance. Bad and good things will happen to all of us, and God will be there loving us. May God give us the courage to exercise that love in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE IN CHRIST'S ETERNAL GLORY, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

Helping Children Cope with Disaster*



Disasters may strike quickly and without warning. These events can be frightening for adults, but they are traumatic for children.

Children and Their Response to Disaster

Children depend on daily routines: They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, play with friends. When emergencies or disasters interrupt this routine, children may become anxious.

In a disaster, they will look to adults for help. How adults react to an emergency gives them clues on how to act. If one reacts with alarm, a child may become more scared. They see adult's fear as proof that the danger is real.

Children's fears also may stem from their imagination, and adults should take these feelings seriously. When talking with your child, be sure to present a realistic picture that is both honest and manageable.

Feelings of fear are healthy and natural for adults and children. When danger has passed, concentrate on the child's emotional needs by asking the child to tell what is uppermost in his or her mind. Having children participate in the family's recovery activities will help them feel that their life will return to "normal." How adults or parents respond during this time may have a lasting impact.

Be aware that after a disaster, children are most afraid that --

- the event will happen again.
- someone will be injured or killed.
- they will be separated from the family.
- they will be left alone.

Give reassurance and physical comfort.

Immediately after the disaster, try to reduce your child's fear and anxiety. Physically holding children brings comfort and a sense of security. Children need extra hugs, smiles and hand-holding. If possible, keep the family (including pets) together. Reassure them that they are safe and that there is someone there to take care of them. Hearing a parent or adult say, "I will take care of you," makes children feel safe. Young children have great faith in adults' powers and are responsive to adult reassurances. Model and demonstrate coping skills, because children will imitate adults in reacting to the situation.

Provide structure.

Children need to find consistency and security in their day, especially when the rest of their life is unpredictable. Provide a framework that will be the same from day to day. Emphasize familiar routines at playtime, clean-up, naptime, meals and bedtime. Make sure children are getting

appropriate sleep, exercise and nutrition. Play soothing music and model moving slowly and using a quiet voice. Children may have a difficult time accepting routines and other limits, but persevere by being firm and supportive. Make decisions for children when they cannot cope with choice.

Welcome children's talking about the disaster.

Children regain a sense of control by talking about things that bother them, and talking with a supportive adult can help them clarify their feelings. At the same time, children should not be pressured to talk; they may need time to absorb these experiences before discussing them. To help children feel comfortable, parents and other adults can share their own feelings of fear and anxiety, but they should always do so in a calm, reassuring way. For example, you might say, "I was frightened when I saw the explosions, but I knew there were people who were ready to help out." What children need most is to feel that the situation is under control.

Focus on experiences that help children release tension.

Calmly and firmly explain the situation. As best as you can, tell children what you know about the disaster. Explain what will happen next. For example, say, "Tonight, we will all stay together in the shelter." Get down to the child's eye level and talk to them.

Encourage children to talk. Let children talk about the disaster and ask questions as much as they want. Encourage children to describe what they're feeling. Listen to what they say. If possible, include the entire family in the discussion.

Include children in recovery activities. Give children chores that are their responsibility. This will help children feel they are part of the recovery. Having a task will help them understand that everything will be all right.

Provide opportunities for children to be children.

Use what is available to give children time for the relaxing, therapeutic experience of playing with sand, water, clay, etc.

Provide plenty of time and opportunity for children to work out their concerns and feelings through dramatic play. Create props that children can use to pretend they are firefighters, doctors, rescue workers or other helpers. In dramatic play, children can pretend that they are big and strong to gain control over their trauma and to overcome feelings of helplessness. Spend more time in settings that give children opportunities for physical activity and that provide an emotional release.

Model peaceful resolution to conflict.

Peaceful resolution to conflict is one way to give children a stronger sense of power and control, especially critical in the wake of a disaster, which leaves them feeling powerless. Because children who have experienced the emotional trauma and violence of disaster often behave aggressively, they need to see alternatives to using violence to solve problems.

Maintain perspective.

As we learn more about the individuals who are responsible for these tragic events, adults must help children avoid making inappropriate assumptions and using labels about groups of people based on their race, ethnicity, religious background or national origin.

Watch for changes in behavior.

Mental health professionals suggest that, children, like adults, may exhibit symptoms of stress following a disaster. For preschoolers, such symptoms may include thumb-sucking, bedwetting, clinging, changes in sleep or eating patterns, and isolation from other children. Older children may be irritable or aggressive and display poor concentration, among other changes in their behavior. Experts also suggest that it is natural for children to display behavioral changes as they emotionally process their anxiety and fear.

You can help children cope by understanding what causes their anxieties and fears. Reassure them with firmness and love. Your children will realize that life will eventually return to normal. If a child does not respond to the above suggestions, seek help from a mental health specialist or a member of the clergy.

**Adapted from information developed by The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Family Protection Program in cooperation with the American Red Cross' Community Disaster Education Program and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.*

Additional Resources from National Health Ministries

"Being Present" With Those Who Grieve - <http://www.pcusa.org/health/usa/careteams/grief.htm>

Dealing with Depression - <http://www.pcusa.org/health/usa/healthinfo/sad3.htm>

Additional Resources for Coping with Loss and Traumatic Stress are available from:

American Psychiatric Association
1400 K St., NW
Washington, DC 20005
Toll-Free: (888) 357-7924
Fax: (202) 682-6850
E-Mail: apa@psych.org
<http://www.psych.org/>

National Institute of Mental Health
6001 Executive Blvd.
Room 8184, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663
Phone: (301) 443-4513
E-Mail: nimhinfo@nih.gov
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>

American Red Cross National Headquarters
2025 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006
Phone: (202) 303-4498
Disaster Assistance info: (866) GET-INFO (866-438-4636)
<http://www.redcross.org/>

Anxiety Disorders Association of America
8730 Georgia Avenue
Suite 600
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Phone: (240) 485-1001
Fax: (240) 485-1035
<http://www.adaa.org/>

National Association for the Education of Young Children
1509 16th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036
1-800-424-2460
<http://www.naeyc.org/>