

Where was God when Calamity Struck His Church?

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a
far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

2 Corinthians 4:17

The letter that follows addresses the great tragedy that struck God's people in Brookfield Wisconsin just three short weeks ago. It answers the question that has been uttered thousands of times since that horrible day.

Blow the Trumpet

Proclaiming the Gospel as a Witness

April 1, 2005

To All the Saints
in the Churches of God

Re: A Great Tragedy in Wisconsin

Dear Brethren,

On Saturday afternoon March 12, 2005 an act of unspeakable evil was inflicted on a congregation of the Living Church of God in Brookfield, Wisconsin. In reality this savagery struck at all of God's people around the world—not simply one COG organization. In its wake, many are now asking why an all powerful and infinitely merciful God would allow such a horrible thing to happen to His spiritual family? After all, He certainly could have prevented this carnage. The question that lingers is WHY DIDN'T HE? Why did God decide to not rescue His own people from such an awful tragedy? What led this Great Deliverer to “stand down” when calamity struck His Son's “bride to be”?

At times like this it is only natural to ponder such questions. This is because the very act of viciousness that brought us to think of them in the first place makes absolutely no sense. Why would someone do such a thing? What would drive a person to inflict such massive suffering on others? Consider for a moment what took place that fateful day. In one minute a community of true believers gathered to worship their Heavenly Father according to His commandment, and in the next a hail of gunfire rang out bringing to an end the lives of people who only wanted to do what they had done so many other Sabbath days prior to this one. Those whose innocent lives were snuffed out came to celebrate something that defined such a great part of their faith. To them this was a day to worship God in song, to be spiritually fed by His servants, and to fellowship with their brethren. They were even planning to have a pot luck dinner and a church activity that evening. However, what seemed like a perfect way to spend this holy time became anything but perfect.

Since that tragic afternoon numerous articles and emails have surfaced on the Internet offering various theories regarding what happened and why. For the most part those who have written have been gracious toward the victims who suffered as well as to the Living Church of God and its leaders. I am

certain that words of consolation and hope have poured in to Dr. Roderick Meredith and other leaders of the LCG, as well they should. We too extend our deepest sympathies to them and pray that God will encourage them as they continue in His service.

Some however, have tried to link this bloodshed to some specific trespass (such as a doctrinal position) committed by God's church in general or by the LCG in particular. Perhaps it was their position regarding going to restaurants on the Sabbath, or the names they use when referring to their Creator. Maybe it's the method they employ when calculating the holy days or whether they believe Mr. Herbert W Armstrong was the prophesied Elijah to come. If not that then certainly it must have been the church's approach to government or how and who should be preaching the gospel. Some have even suggested that God allowed this heartbreaking day to happen as a way to express His displeasure at the lack of unity in the church. After all He certainly couldn't be pleased with all the bickering that goes on among His children.

I'm sure many other issues will be raised to explain why God's people were hit with such great force that day. Accusing fingers will undoubtedly be pointed and the usual suspects will be rounded up and interrogated until the real culprit responsible for this dastardly act is finally exposed. After all, an event like this demands an explanation. And there must be one out there somewhere. But are we looking in the right place? And is it possible that the solution to this mystery has been with us all along?

A History of Tragedy

The Bible reveals that this is not the first time God's people have suffered at the hands of evil. Furthermore, the scriptures state that this is not the last time it will happen either. Jesus Christ Himself warned that His followers would suffer persecution and even martyrdom (Mt. 10:21-25, 24:9).

This being the case, consider how violence has raised its ugly hand against God's Church down through the ages. In the first century virtually every apostle with the exception of John died a violent death. Stephen the first recorded Christian martyr other than the Messiah was actually killed with the consent of Saul who would later become the great apostle Paul. Additionally, the book of Hebrews provides a sobering glimpse into the great price God's spiritual family has paid for their faith.

And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions. Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (Heb. 11:32-38)

This is just a brief view of how persecution attacks God's people, and if the Bible is true, the greatest assault is yet to come. This is borne out in the words of the apostle John when writing the book of Revelation. Here, John was taken in vision to the very last days of man's reign on this planet—and once again the ultimate sacrifice is required of God's people. Notice what John writes.

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled. (Rev. 6:9-11)

With this vision John was being told that great bloodshed will once again face God's people at the end time. As tragic as this picture is, it is true none-the-less. As this world comes closer to its end it will become more hostile to God's way and His people. And it will act out that hostility with unspeakable violence.

But is the slaughter that took place in Wisconsin the same thing the scriptures predicted would happen to God's people during the last days? After all, the Bible suggests that persecution will be delivered by those who hate what God's people believe—the faith they hold dear and the path they have chosen. To a great extent it will be spearheaded by powerful political leader known as the beast and an apostate religious figure known as the false prophet. What took place in Wisconsin doesn't remotely resemble that. This carnage wasn't religious persecution. What these Christians suffered was nothing other than evil run amuck—a deranged man carrying out mass murder. To assign another explanation to it is simply manufacturing an answer.

This being the case it is fair to ask two very important questions: (1) Could what happened in Wisconsin possibly be a part of God's will and His plan? And (2) if no, why did he allow it to happen? Let us briefly address both of these questions.

The answer to the first question is yes only in the sense that everything will ultimately work toward the fulfillment of God's purpose. However, in no way shape or form did God want this to happen nor did He somehow orchestrate this act. Therefore, the real answer to this question is an emphatic NO. If anyone wants to know what God's will truly is they simply have to look at the third heaven where that will is performed continually. Or we could look at God's millennial Kingdom or to the New Heavens and the New Earth. It is there that God's desire will be done. What happened in Wisconsin was about as far from God's will as anything can get. Furthermore, despite what some may believe, God does not use evil as a method to test mankind or His Church. The apostle James put it this way.

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. (Jas. 1:13-15)

The point James was making is that evil is a product of those whose will goes contrary to God and His will. Those who fall into this category include Satan the devil and the society he has deceived and corrupted. Therefore, the real culprit lies here. The good news is that God can take a horrible calamity and use it to build something great and that is precisely what the scriptures say He will do. This is why Christians are exhorted to rejoice when trials come (Jas.1: 2-3).

However, if God didn't bring this evil on His people, and if He actually hates such things then why didn't He stop it? This is really the Great puzzle we face. Furthermore, it is one that must be solved. So now we return to the BIG question: Why did God allow this to happen?

Can Anyone Know for Sure?

The tragedy that struck God's Church is not unlike many catastrophes that rip apart our world. For example: Disasters such as those that hit Indonesia last December or the one that devastated the United States on 9/11 are mind boggling. And like such tragedies people are driven to search for answers. However, in the end most of our leaders eventually concede that they just don't have one. Take for example Dr. Billy Graham. When speaking at a national prayer service following the attack on America, Dr. Graham made the following comment:

"I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction."

Dr. Graham was not alone in his assessment of this horrible day. The vast majority of Americans, including its moral leaders, were stunned by not only the clear presence of evil that immersed the United States on 9/11, but also by what appeared to be the total absence of deliverance. Tragically, they had no clear explanation for what happened and why.

With this said, is it possible for us to know with absolute certainty why God allowed the carnage that took place on March 12th? According to one long time evangelist in God's Church the answer is once again "No".

"No one really knows for sure why God allowed innocent people to die by the hand of a depressed, mentally disturbed person. And it is unlikely that any person will ever know all the answers to this question!"

For the most part the sentiments expressed by this faithful servant of God mirrors those of the vast majority in His Church including its leaders. But is this true? Is it impossible to know why God allows human suffering—even the suffering of His own people?

It would seem that tragedy, especially when it hits so close to home is hard to explain. But contrary to what many may believe THERE IS AN EXPLANATION. There is an absolute, unapologetic, straightforward answer to why God allows suffering even in His church. Once again, there is a clear and direct answer to the question that has been on the lips of thousands of God's people during the last few weeks:

Why did God allow this tragedy?

In order to fully comprehend why God would allow His Church to be brutally attacked as it was just a few short weeks ago it is essential to understand something about evil itself and why God ever permitted it to infest our world in the first place. Once we grasp this vital truth it will become abundantly clear that despite any appearances, God is not only in complete charge of His human family but that His plan for them is working with pinpoint precision. Furthermore, by understanding this vital truth, His people will be able to make complete sense out of what seems to be absolute insanity.

It Wasn't Always This Way

The Bible reveals that there once was a time when this world was vastly different than it is today. It was at total peace. It was a world filled with HOPE and PROMISE. At that time man had access to his Creator and God spoke directly to him. It was during this time that the first human family made a terrible mistake—one that would have tragic consequences on every succeeding generation.

The book of Genesis reveals that shortly after creating Adam and Eve, God placed them in an exquisite paradise and invited them to explore all that was around them. However, with this invitation also came a warning. God explained that in the midst of the garden was a tree whose fruit was life threatening. If Adam or Eve ate of it, they would most certainly die. Notice God's words.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it: for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die." (Gen. 2:16-17)

As a loving Father, God was committed to protecting his newly created earthly family. For this reason, He gave specific instructions concerning their very survival. It is hard to imagine how anyone would decline to follow such a warning. After all, if you were at a restaurant and someone you trusted said, "Don't eat this. It's toxic and will kill you," you most certainly wouldn't eat it. This being the case, why would God's instructions be so difficult to follow? The answer to this question lies in understanding what these two trees actually were.

What Were the Two Trees?

Today there are numerous theories concerning the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Clearly, the tree of life would have been preferable to eat, but ironically, man declined the invitation to do so. On the other hand, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil should have been avoided at all costs. Yet that is not what happened. Why? Furthermore, is it possible to know what these trees truly were? And will such an understanding provide greater insight into the course man took concerning the choices he was given?

To better understand these two trees, it is critical to understand the God who made them as well as the beings that resided in Eden. Lets begin with understanding something about mankind and the way he was made.

The Moral Judgments of Men

The Bible states without ambiguity that man was never designed to be the moral authority in his own life. As difficult as this might be to believe, humanity simply does not have the proper equipment to navigate its own moral and ethical path. King Solomon, a man regarded by many as the wisest person who ever lived, came to understand this truth. When writing the book of Proverbs, Solomon made a profound observation about man and the moral choices he makes.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but the ends thereof are the ways of death.
(Pro. 14:12)

Virtually all mankind has witnessed Solomon's words in action. We have seen good intentions play out to catastrophic results. Even Solomon's own life and the choices he made reflect this great moral law.

Solomon was not the only one to draw the conclusion that man was incapable of successfully managing his ethical path. The great prophet Jeremiah also pondered man's qualifications to rightly preside over his moral decisions. He concluded that man would invariably fall victim to his own moral and ethical devices. Notice his words.

The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. (Jer. 17:9)

Here, Jeremiah is stating that man cannot trust his own judgment because the seat of that judgment (the heart) is not trustworthy. But there is more. King David, who the Bible describes as "a man after God's heart" (Acts 13:22), expressed a profound truth about man's inability to grasp "right" and "wrong."

Who can understand his own error? (Psa. 19:12)

The question David asked in this verse is rhetorical. The truth of the matter is that no one can understand his own error. That is why man makes so many. The point here is that man's capacity to navigate his own moral path is nonexistent. Despite his assertions to the contrary, man was never designed to be the moral authority in his own life. The great prophet Jeremiah conveyed this absolute truth in words that couldn't be more clear.

O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walks to direct his own steps. (Jer. 10:23)

The words of Jeremiah state a truth that this world has rejected since the Garden of Eden. Simply put, man left to his own moral devices will choose the wrong path. Jesus Christ himself understood this absolute moral law, and His life reflected this understanding. The Bible states that when Jesus walked as a man on the earth, He refused to do something that every other human being has done without thinking since the days of Adam and Eve. Jesus refused to direct His own moral steps. That's right: even the Messiah did not rely on his own wisdom. Notice His words.

I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just: because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which has sent me. (Jn. 5:30)

The Bible categorically asserts that the Great God, who made the heavens and the earth and all things, stands as the one and only unimpeachable Moral Authority in the universe. It is He who decides what is right and what is wrong, what is just and what is unjust, what is good and what is evil. Jesus totally understood this principle, and because of this, He totally surrendered His moral will to the Father. He did so because He absolutely knew that His Father was the source of all that possesses virtue and goodness.

“You Will Surely Die”

When God warned Adam and Eve about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He was identifying the very source of all human suffering. That source is man thinking he can decide for himself what is right and what is wrong, what is just and what is unjust, what is good and what is evil. Man has attempted to make these moral pronouncements for millennia and the result has always been untold suffering.

The fact of the matter is that down through history every tragic step man has taken has been guided by moral self-will. Every estrangement in human history is born out of self-will. Every divorce is born out of self-will. Every lie and every word of gossip is born out of self-will. Every obscenity and every profanity is born out of self-will. Every war that was ever fought has been provoked by self-will. Furthermore, every murder that has ever been committed was born out of self-will. The point here is that man might know “good” and “evil,” but he will never be able to know good from evil. Six thousand years of human history has borne this out.

Clearly, the story of mankind is a story of defiance. It is a story of man thinking that he can decide for himself how he will direct his own steps. The danger of such arrogance is staggering. As a result of believing he can navigate his own moral path, man has wreaked havoc on the earth. Since the dawn of human history, he has crafted virtually thousands of religions, thousands of governments, and thousands of laws. He has done so in an attempt to make his world better. But who really thinks it is? Virtually all suffering down through history has its origin in a tree emphatically declared “off limits” by none other than God Himself. (Gen. 3:3).

The great tragedy today is that man continues to eat of that tree. As he makes moral judgments that fail to reflect God’s law, he is eating from a tree that brings death. When he crafts a culture that ignores the great moral principles outlined in the scriptures, he is eating from a tree that brings death. When he declares that he can decide for himself what values are appropriate, he is eating from a tree that brings death. When he creates governmental systems that refuse to acknowledge the true God, he is eating from a tree that brings death. When he fashions religions that reflect the traditions of men and not the commandments of God, he is eating from a tree that brings death. And although many of man’s attempts at crafting his own moral world may appear harmless, they most assuredly are not. If man can take one bite of that forbidden tree, another man can take two, and before long, he will become a veritable glutton for its fruit.

At this point, it is important to understand that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents everything God is not. That tree was toxic in the beginning, and it remains toxic to this very day. That is why God warned man not to touch it. But there is something even more significant regarding the evil brought forth by Adam and Eve’s defiance. This is the fact that evil is not something that can be contained. It attacks everyone and everything it comes in contact with. As a result there has never been a human being that has not felt its effects. In other words, evil is an equal opportunity wrecker of lives. It attacks the unjust and the innocent, the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the meek, the brilliant and the simple, the strong and the feeble, the young and the ancient. Its tentacles have spread to every corner of the globe and there is not one square inch of this world that has not felt the effects of a horribly misguided decision made by the first people God placed on this planet. God allowed this to be in order that all mankind could feel its effects and understand how horrible sin is.

When man and woman were first placed in the garden of Eden, God set before them a choice. On one side of this choice was a path that would lead to life. However, that path could only be traveled by obeying the Great Creator and Sustainer of the universe. In order to do so, Adam and Eve would have to accept God as the true Moral Authority of heaven and earth. However, in order to accept God's Moral Authority over their lives, they would have to reject the way of self-determination.

Regrettably, the power of moral self-determination is immensely appealing. It certainly was to the great archangel Lucifer. This spectacular angelic creature thought he could be his own moral judge and decide for himself what was good and what was evil. Sadly, that belief led to his own destruction. And regardless of how hard Satan tries to promote the idea that one should be able to direct his own moral path, that path will always lead to the same place: MISERY and DEATH. The great tragedy to this story is that there was another tree in that garden – one whose fruit was so different. It was a tree that would sustain the perfection God had created when He renewed the face of the earth.

The Tree of Life

When God warned Adam and Eve to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He was not arguing that this tree lacked appeal. He knew otherwise. However, as appealing as it was, it could only bring unimaginable suffering on all mankind. Furthermore, that suffering would spread to every corner of the earth and touch every human being that ever existed.

However, there was another tree in that garden—a tree that would bring great hope and great joy. It was a tree whose fruit would engender life. With this in mind, is it possible to know specifically what this tree was?

What is the Tree of Life?

The short answer to this question is that the tree of life was and is everything the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not. But is there more? To better understand what this tree is, consider its name. It is called the TREE OF LIFE. Therefore, it seems logical to ask: what is it that brings life?

Earlier we saw that moral “self-determination” leads to death, and is symbolized by a forbidden tree. This being the case, is it possible that the tree of life is the rejection of moral “self-determination?” Is it possible that the tree of life symbolizes God's will and His moral authority over our lives? In other words, by partaking of this tree, we are acknowledging God as the sole moral force in our life. In essence, we are surrendering our will to Him.

If this is the case, then the tree of life embodies all that is Godly, including His will, His law, and His word. This is not to suggest that God wants intellectual “robots” in His Kingdom. What God is conveying through His word is that He is the source of moral excellence, and as such, man needs to rely on Him. By doing so, he will avoid a self-destructive path and instead will travel a road that will lead to eternity. The key to this road is to honor God's word.

The scriptures reveal that God's word brings life. The Bible is a book of life. It reflects the wisdom of the very Creator of all things. King David expressed great insight into the life-giving properties of God's word. His thoughts as expressed throughout the Psalms acknowledge the Creator as sovereign over all that exists, including morality. He actually declared that God's moral judgments, as reflected in His law, have the power to PRESERVE LIFE.

The 119th Psalm was dedicated to the greatness of God's law. Its words are compelling and true. Here, David is appealing to his Creator for that which possesses life-sustaining properties. Consider this king's words.

- Quicken me according to your word. (Psa.119: 25)
- Quicken me in your way. (v. 37)
- Quicken me in your righteousness. (v. 40)
- Your word has quickened me. (v. 50)
- Quicken me, O Lord, according to Your word. (v. 107)
- Quicken me, O Lord, according to Your judgments. (v. 149)
- Quicken me according to Your word. (v. 154)
- Quicken me according to Your judgments. (v. 156)

The Hebrew word for “quicken” used in each of these verses is *kawyah*. Literally translated, this word means: “to revive,” “to keep or make alive,” “to nourish or preserve,” and “to restore to life.” The point here is that God’s word sustains life. In the very same way that God breathed life into man, He breathed life into His word. The apostle Paul acknowledged this profound truth in his second epistle to the evangelist Timothy.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That man may be perfect thoroughly finished unto all good works. (2Tim. 3:16-17)

The word for “inspiration” used by Paul in this passage comes from a term that literally means “divinely breathed in.” When Paul stated that all scripture is given by “inspiration,” he was declaring that it was “God-breathed.” His breath gives His word life in the same way His breath gave Adam and Eve life.

Choose Life

When God placed Adam and Eve in the garden He had prepared for them, He was giving them the opportunity to define how the world of the future would be. If it was to be a place of great peace and prosperity, they would have to forsake their own self-will and instead yield to the moral authority of the Great God in heaven.

On the other hand, Adam and Eve could go it alone, and see what the world would look like with man as the moral authority. The choice was theirs to make. God gave them that power. However, He also exhorted them to choose wisely.

Tragically, Adam and Eve chose the path of moral self-will. Furthermore, man continues to make the same choice today. As a result, our world has been ravaged by six thousand years of human mismanagement. And as difficult as this might be to believe, the world with all its evil is exactly the way it should be. Its diseases, its ignorance, its crime, its oppression all reflect man deciding that he will be the moral authority. Furthermore, under this system man has not only created an endless stream of horrors but he continues to sustain them. That’s right, mankind continues to perpetuate the evil he has been deceived into creating—an evil that even inflicts its will on the innocent. This is what happened in Wisconsin to God’s very own people. It is what happened in Jerusalem to His very own Son. And if the scriptures are correct it will happen again. Not because God hates man, but rather because man hates God.

Why did God allow this tragedy?

The question of why a just God would allow horrible suffering such as that which took place on 911 or during a peaceful church service in Brookfield, Wisconsin must truly be a painful one to ask. This is because it is almost always inspired by acts of great hurt and anguish. But there is an answer to this question - one that offers a painful reality.

God allows horrible events like that which struck our nation and our church as well as so many other tragedies because He wants all mankind to know what the world would look like without Him as its guiding moral presence. This is not God's world. Man decided he did not need God's wisdom and virtue while living in a garden some 6000 years ago. There, man decided to determine for himself what was "good" and what was "evil." And he continues to assert that "right" to this very day.

As a result of man's judgment, the innocent will always suffer. There will always be poverty. Families will always be ripped apart by divorce. Ignorance and superstition will always corrupt man's great potential. Justice will always be perverted. Snipers will always kill at random. Children will always be abducted from their homes and murdered. Sickness and disease will always attack the weak. Tyrants will always rule the earth, fanatics will always commit unspeakable acts of terror. And innocent people worshipping the true God will continue to be gunned down by brutal killers.

For this reason God's leaders and His people must hate what this world represents. We must abhor not only the evil that strikes so close to home, but also the evil that saturates this earth. And even if it cannot be seen it is there never-the-less. Not only does this world need God's Kingdom, but His Church needs that kingdom as well.

We at ***Blow the Trumpet*** would like to leave you with a final thought to ponder: The Time is Short, The Work is Great, and The Laborers are Few. PRAY FOR THE WORK. And PRAY FOR THE KINGDOM.

Respectfully,

Dennis Fischer

Blow the Trumpet