

Are We Ready?

Recently during the bad weather there was a multi-car pile-up on Interstate 70. More than 30 vehicles including cars and tractor-trailer rigs were damaged and at least one person was killed. Would you say that the person that died was a worse sinner than the 40 or 50 other people that were involved? The logical answer is of course no. And the real question for all of us is, if we were in a similar circumstance would we be ready if we were to die?

The scripture lesson for today is a lesson for all of us about how we can relate to God in times of trouble or sadness. (Luke 13: 1 – 9) We should not equate our circumstances with how strong or how weak our faith is...because the same thing can happen to someone who follows a religion other than Christianity. Someone who is Buddhist can be miraculously healed just as easily as someone who is a Christian. Someone who worships Allah can get cancer just as easily as someone who worships God.

The following passage is from a book I have been reading by Jim Burgen entitled “No More Dragons”. In chapters 5 and 6 he addresses this very scripture

lesson and offer some helpful insight into what this means for us:

When your circumstances are difficult and you can't understand them, they hurt badly. When someone you love dies, it hurts badly. When someone molests you, lies to you, abuses you, or leaves you, it hurts badly. When the worst thing you can imagine becomes a reality in your life, can you even begin to fathom any explanation from God or anyone else that would bring you to a place of contentment? “Oh, so that's why God allowed this to happen to me. Well, now that I have some answers, I'm glad it happened. Thanks for clearing that up for me, Lord. Now I can move on.”

I find it impossible to imagine any comforting explanations for the worst circumstances of my life. Sure, maybe I'm glad that something good might eventually come out of my pain or loss, but in the moment, if I were able to choose between learning something from my painful circumstances or not having to experience any pain in the first place, I would choose the latter every single time.

When I was a youth pastor, I received a phone call late one night and learned that two boys in my youth group had been killed in a car accident earlier that evening. I met their parents at the hospital and accompanied them while they identified the bodies.

The next morning, a group of us had gathered at the home of Chris, one of the boys who were killed. I was in

the kitchen with Chris's mom, Debbie. We mostly sat in silence. I tried to think of something to say that would offer some comfort but nothing came to mind. When I tried, Debbie reached across the table, put her hand on mine, and said, "Jim, I know Chris is in heaven. I know he is in a better place. I know he is with Jesus, and he will never again experience pain. I know all that. But, right now, I just want him to walk down those stairs and eat breakfast."

Years later, I can look back and see how Chris's life and death inspired many kids in our church to do great things with their lives and ministries. However, in that kitchen that morning, if I could have explained that to Debbie, she wouldn't have been able to hear it. And if she did, she wouldn't have cared. All she knew was that Chris was gone, and it hurt badly.

Here is the point: of the situations we experience in life are the result of how strong or weak our faith is, then we are all in a lot of trouble. And if our happiness and comfort are based solely on how often we pray, fast, attend church, or refuse to cuss and drink, then why would we need God in the first place?

We cannot equate our painful circumstances with God being bad, weak, or inattentive. On the other hand, we cannot equate our good circumstances with God rewarding us for faithful behavior. Regardless of our faith, sometimes God allows sharks to bite, towers to crumble, and cars to wreck. But while we may never have our moments of pain explained or justified to us, we

are still called to trust that God knows what is best for us and will remain by our sides. And having an explanation wouldn't soothe the pain, right?

Many of us have grown up with a skewed definition of faith, so I want to set the record straight. Faith is not a formula that coerces God into doing the things that we desire. Faith is not a magic potion that keeps all of the bad stuff out of our lives. And faith is not a code that, once cracked, explains our circumstances, connects the dots, and makes sense of our pain.

If faith is not a magic formula devised to trick or trap God into accomplishing our own goals, then what *is* faith?

Put simply, faith is trusting in God's promise to give us more than enough mercy, grace, love, compassion, and strength during our times of most desperate need. Faith is the assurance that, whether our circumstances change for better or worse, we know we are not alone, because God still loves us and he will take care of us.

Well I could go on and read another whole chapter but I think I'll stop here. I have found this book to be very helpful and I recommend it to you. It's called "No More Dragons" by Jim Burgen.

May God bless you and help you to always be ready when he calls. Amen.