

“If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

Ps. 11, Lk. 11:14-28, Is. 58:6-8

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Introduction: It seems the tragedies in our world come one on the heels of another these days – do you get that impression? It’s very sobering what we’re seeing on the world scene, right in our “back yard”: Morocco’s earthquake with thousands of victims, some mountain villages almost totally wiped out – what could ever bring comfort to these people in their terrible losses? Then there’s the drama in El Hierro; statistics say about 11,000 refugees have arrived in the Canary Islands by boat between Jan. and Aug., most fleeing the situation in Senegal, plus some Malians and Gambians (and thousands more waiting to set sail!). The refugee crisis is still on the rise (and all across the Mediterranean). It’s just one part of the current people movements, with thousands from the south surging north, fleeing from Africa and the Near East to Europe. The same desperation motivates those struggling through the jungles of the Darien Gap (between Colombia and Panama), especially from Venezuela and Haiti, both examples of societies collapsing under the weight of sin. A lot of organized crime is plying its trade here: the dangers from trafficking, robbery and rape are as persistent as the wild animals in the jungle or the fast currents of the rivers, or steep ravines and mountains. And if they survive the trek all the way to northern Mexico, more barriers await them; yet 10,000 a day are surging across the southern US border! It’s the restless flow of humanity, urgently pursuing elusive dreams. And one of the most tragic manifestations of this human pursuit has been the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, to which we’ve all had to be witnesses in these past eight days. The kibbutz of Kfar Aza, an Israeli farming community of about 750 people, many of them families with young children, has now been reduced to rubble and carnage – just one of the scenes of massacre. As the editor of *Christianity Today* wrote, “*Israelis and Palestinians are equally beloved of God. But there’s no moral ambiguity about the genocidal evil of Hamas*” (Russell Moore). Now, of course, we have to witness the devastating retaliation as Israel tries to make sure this cannot happen again, and still more innocent lives are destroyed. Where will it all end?!

Meanwhile, the Earth is on course to cross multiple dangerous tipping points soon that will be disastrous for the environment and people across the world. Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research points to the collapse of Greenland’s ice cap and sections of Antarctic ice sheets, the disruption of Gulf Stream currents and rise of ocean temperatures in general, and the destabilization of the Amazon rainforest, as critical tipping points; these are when a temperature threshold is passed, leading to unstoppable change in a climate system. And we’re already there, edging up to the precipice of these tipping points, which will lead to still more instability.

Last spring, when Susie and I visited our grandchildren in Holland, we took them to Westerbork; from 1942-1945, it served as a transit camp located in the German-occupied Netherlands, a temporary collection point for Jews in the Netherlands prior to their deportation by the Nazis to extermination

centers and concentration camps in the east. More than 100,000 Jews spent time in the Westerbork transit camp prior to their deportation; only 5,000 survived. Netherlands, Germany and Poland are dotted with such somber places, like Auschwitz, Dachau, and Sobibor, reminders of the multiple human tragedies of our collective past. World history is actually a horror story of overwhelming dimensions when viewed in terms of man's inhumanity to man. The examples too many to enumerate: like the Slave Castle of Ghana (with its "Door of No Return," through which millions of Africans were forced onto slave ships bound for the New World); the Killing Fields of Rwanda (in 1994, more than 800,000 Rwandans were brutally slaughtered by fellow citizens, Tutsi ethnic group); the Killing Fields of Cambodia (more than 1,300,000 people killed by the Khmer Rouge regime, late 1970's); persecution and warfare, from Somalia to Sudan, Yemen, and Libya. Who taught these people to glorify war? Who gave them the arms?! The effects of war live on generation after generation ("sins of the fathers visited upon the children" for generations). Ask any Ukrainian! The number of dead or mutilated soldiers is on the rise (on both sides!), and the trauma they're having to assimilate will continue to reverberate! Terrorist victims also keep multiplying in the Sahel: from Nigeria to Kenya – how do we help the survivors? The top 12 terrorist nations for last year received their ranking according to the number of incidents, fatalities, injuries, and damages. ***"If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"***

Besides all this, the war in Ukraine and the increase in extreme weather events are stretching already fragile food supply chains (especially after shutdowns from COVID). As the Ukrainian war continued to suppress food production, droughts in Europe and Africa in 2022, as well as floods in countries such as Pakistan, have contributed to high food prices and shortages worldwide. Combined with a rise in fertilizer and labor costs, these have created inflationary pressures, and the current food price volatility exposes how fragile our global food system is: rising food insecurity, social unrest, displacement and migration are all noticeable effects. Meanwhile, 10,000 children die daily from chronic poor nutrition. 99% of malnourished people live in countries that are underdeveloped, and approximately 10% of the global population suffer from hunger. Asia has the most hungry people, but in sub-Saharan Africa 25% of the population suffers from hunger. Experts disagree on how to end hunger worldwide. Jesus said we will always have the poor among us – He knew us well.

1) How do we respond to all these overwhelming needs? All the major tech companies are vying for our attention, which has thus become one of the most coveted raw materials in the so-called attention economy. For Netflix, Facebook, Amazon or Apple, it's all about getting us to spend our limited time on their platforms. It's the same with NGO's and other non-profits out there trying to help assuage the pain and misery – their public relations departments are strained to the max coming up with different schemes to get us to pay attention to them so we'll invest our compassion spending in their organization, so they can be more effective.

How do we carry the burden of other people's tragedies, empathize without being overwhelmed, persevere in caring for the weary and wounded (even when your own wounds may be festering)? What do we do when the attempt to empathize and help others carry their burdens wears us down? What comeback do we have when the enemy confronts us with the claim that the foundations are being destroyed – and the world situation seems to bear it out – and the conclusion seems logical that there's nothing to be done but shrug our shoulders and fall into mere "survival mode"? How does a Christian respond to a world that seems determined to destroy us all? How do we keep our sanity in the midst of so much chaos going on all around us? Compassion fatigue is a term that describes the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of helping others (often through experiences of stress or trauma), without adequate breaks or support. Our world's many hotspots of violence, terrorism, war, starvation, and other human tragedies can quickly bring us to the border of compassion collapse. One prominent psychologist tells us that trauma victims will be the new missions frontier of the 21st century (Diane Langberg).

How do we keep our sanity in the midst of so much chaos going on in our world right now? There has to be a reference point for it that's much bigger than we are. In Ps. 11, the answer to the question about what can the righteous do seems to be that there's nothing to be done; the cause is hopeless; we may as well give up and just focus on self. But the psalmist's answer is about affirming the truth of God's sovereignty: He's on His throne, in His holy temple; no matter how disastrous the outlook, He sees, He tests the children of Adam, He examines the righteous, but He despises the wicked and their violence; they will not ultimately triumph.

2) Jesus fleshes that out more fully in Lk. 11 with references to the prince of this world and his ultimate destruction by One who is stronger. In fact, this is probably Jesus' favorite metaphor for His mission and the key to interpreting His whole ministry; it's what best captures His earthly purpose. Clearly the "strong man" in this parable represents the enemy who has usurped authority in the world and is jealously guarding his stolen possessions. This would explain why things have kept spiraling downward in human history; only the Gospel resists that trend. Logically, only one who is stronger will be able to enter his domain, overpower him, and take away his treasures. So the evidence that Jesus is stronger is found precisely in those exorcisms He's been performing, freeing people from their spiritual bondage, which amounts to a direct assault on Satan's domain. So v. 22 outlines the strategy Jesus is using against the enemy: the world is like Satan's palace where he has settled in as if he were the owner; but by means of the incarnation, Jesus has entered his dominion and begun to tie him up, demonstrating that Satan is a usurper with no real rights or authority here. And Jesus takes away his armor (lies, deceit, corruption), and plunders his house of all the souls and earthly kingdoms the evil one had misappropriated as his own.

The OT had already anticipated a time when God Himself would take plunder away from the mighty and captives away from the tyrant (Is. 49:24-26). Jesus is clearly drawing His metaphor from Isaiah, and sees Himself in that role of the Mighty One of Jacob, fulfilling this promise, rescuing people from the cruelest tyrant and from the most oppressive captivity. He will contend with those who fight against you and He will save your children. He was the definitive bearer of the Holy Spirit, and He came specifically to be our Savior, Champion, and Liberator, because He was the One who could overcome and defeat the prince of this world. And with His exorcisms He was demonstrating His sovereignty over the evil one and offering the first destruction of his works (1 Jn. 3:8). But He didn't accomplish all this using the arms of this world (force/violence/impressing with this-worldly power), but rather with the arms of truth: obedience/submission to God, humility/love. And this is why Jesus' life was so full of divine authority for crushing Satan and freeing up his prisoners – even as Jesus agonized on the cross!

3) How do we keep our equilibrium in a world that is so out of balance? Keep serving when others are crashing from compassion fatigue? Keep your eyes on the cross: God had "come down to our level," so humanity chose to strike Him in the face – repeatedly (precisely what was in our hearts!), but Jesus just turned the other cheek. At the cross, it got a lot worse, but Jesus still kept turning the other cheek ... in the face of the worst crime ever, the worst enemy, the greatest tragedy. Where nobody else saw what was really happening except His Father, Jesus was actually making a spectacle of the great liar, exposing him for the fraud he is, triumphing over the "strong man," as He the Suffering Servant hung there on that accursed tree, *refusing* to give us up for hopeless, *refusing* to abandon us there inside the enemy fortress as hostages. He was *defeating* the enemy who loves to dance on our souls and trample us into the dust of death; He was *conquering* the strong man by forgiving us, wiping the slate clean of all that was written against us, by declaring us acquitted of those awful transgressions that the deceiver had helped us commit, and thereby He was stripping the adversary of all his ammunition with which to accuse us. So, as He hung there between heaven and earth, exposed before us – the naked God in all His glory – even as we were exposed before Him in all our wretchedness – He was ruling on that earthly throne, writing the new covenant with the ink of His own blood, inaugurating a whole new way of life in human flesh – namely, the fullness of the Spirit

in the midst of the most ferocious enemy bombardment! (That enemy would no longer have the right to dance on your soul and trample you into the dust – just by you confessing the name of Jesus – “He is Lord!”) Because Jesus was *enfleshing* the Kingdom of God (the true living reign), grafting it into the fabric of human history by *living it out* in all its powerful consequences under the worst possible circumstances – with perfect unwavering love for God, perfect unwavering love for fellow humans, even as they gave it their best to do their worst to Him: total dehumanization, utter debasement of God’s glory! ***“Consider this One who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself”*** ... so that you do not grow weary or faint-hearted in the midst of these struggles! (Heb. 12:3).