

Tragedy will put our faith in God to the test. You may think you believe in a just, merciful, and loving God, but if a tragedy happens it will put that faith to the test. Take for example the loss of a child; that's a sadness no one wants to face, yet many do. I can think of at least three ways that people who always believed God loved them may react.

The first is anger. When they ask the question, "Why did this happen?" their bitter answer is that God isn't so loving after all. Even though they are innocent, and their child was innocent, God has done evil against them and has become an enemy.

The second way people may react to the death of a child is hope in heaven. When they ask the question, "Why did this happen?" they believe the answer lies in the next life. They still believe that God must be just, but they must be patient and give God time to sort out justice after death. They believe that the pain they carry will go away only when they die. At that point, they may be reunited with their child and they will receive a reward for the suffering they have endured.

A third way to react is action on earth. When they ask the question, "Why did this happen?" their answer is so God can use them to help others. So they will become advocates for parents who have lost children, and use their suffering to ease their pain.

Certainly there are other ways we react to tragedy, but these are three examples. If God is really evil, people will be angry. If God sorts things out after death, people will patiently hope in heaven. If God uses suffering to produce some good, they will get busy doing something about it.

The gospel reports of Jesus on the cross indicate that his suffering shared a little of each. He asked seemingly in anger why God abandoned him; he hoped that his disciples would carry on his mission; he used his pain to bring redemption to the world.

There is a trap we fall into whenever we suffer. We bargain. We tell God, "If you would remove this suffering, then I would be able to be more charitable, or more productive, or more whatever." But suffering doesn't have to go away to be useful. God has incorporated suffering into the plan of salvation. If we are still complaining about the cross we carry, we have not yet witnessed how intimately God is at work with us, even in our pain. The message of Good Friday is that God is not evil, and he doesn't have to wait to end of time for suffering to produce some good. He can use us; God can use our suffering now for the good of others.