

Because

...for anyone who's ever asked, 'why?'

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Surprisingly, it's the quietness of my mum's house that unnerves me. I say that as someone who loves the still moment as an opportunity to ponder life. My dad was a man who loved watching TV. Indeed, he liked introducing me to new films or TV programmes that I hadn't come across before.

However, the house is now quiet. The Universe doesn't feel right - there is a piece missing that was there only a short time ago. Or, as I should say, a person is missing. The incurable illness finally won and my dad died. He is no longer here.

It does not feel right that the lives of the people we love just cease. I have great memories, but the life force, the soul that created those memories, has vanished. A gap has opened up in the world, a hole that seems irreversible. Is that it?

As I sit in the unusual silence of the house, I consider the evidence. There is nothing to satisfy the scientific

examination of say, Professor Brian Cox, a well known scientist, TV presenter and humanist. I see nor hear anything that gives hope. I am aware that there is no test, no experiment that would give any indication of whether there is any future life for my dad.

My mind ponders the story of a woman called Mary. She had an incredible story to tell. Someone she looked up to, a man who had helped her in her time of need, had suffered a terrible miscarriage of justice. The charges against him were trumped up. The city's governor, who saw through the plot, failed to act. Her friend was found guilty and condemned to death. A seemingly tragic end.

But the story did not end there. A few days later, Mary went to pay her respects. The body was gone. Mary broke down sobbing, believing that the body had been stolen. And then...in an amazing twist, that no-one expected...there he was. Mary's friend was alive!

How should I view that story? Should I believe or doubt? Well, there is another surprising witness to this story. A

man called Thomas - who did not believe Mary's experiences. He demanded better evidence that their friend was alive again. And who can blame him?

Thomas got more than he bargained for. One week later he found himself confronted by that better evidence. There was his friend, right there in front of him! What's more, his friend challenged Thomas directly: "Stop doubting and believe."

These two stories were recorded by a third witness - a man called John. John also recorded his experiences: he saw his friend die, he saw the empty grave and then he saw his friend alive again.¹ Jesus, the friend of Mary, Thomas and John, had conquered the impossible. Jesus had taken on death - and won!

I could go on and consider the other witnesses - the Pharisee Saul, who met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. And then there is Peter, Cleopas, James... in fact, Saul (later called Paul) claimed that over 500 people saw Jesus after his resurrection.² Something must have galvanised these people, because they started the

movement we now call Christianity.

So, there is hope. Hope for me, hope for my dad and hope for you. In the silence of my parents' house, with no scientific evidence to hand, I asked myself "Is that it?" The story of Jesus tells us no, that isn't it. We all know people who are now missing from this world. Yet, Jesus tells us that he is saving up the day when he will put that all right. "I am the resurrection and the life," he once told a grieving lady called Martha. And to demonstrate that he could make such a bold statement, he brought Martha's dead brother Lazarus back to life.³

I miss my dad. But I know we will meet again. For Jesus has defeated death and we will all one day benefit.

Notes

1. All these stories are recorded in John's account of Jesus' life, chapter 20.
2. Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, chapter 15 verses 3-7.
3. John's account of Jesus' life, chapter 11.

Hope in Tragedy

by James Henderson

The search for the missing Malaysian Airlines jet that disappeared on the 8th March has gone on too long.

Our hearts go out to the passengers and crew, and we join with their families and friends in hope for more information as to what happened.

Where is God when the news is bleak and tragedy strikes? Philosophers and religious leaders have debated and speculated about this question for centuries. Is he afar off in his heaven, unconcerned about us? Has he left the world to its own devices? Are the terrible things that happen part of his judgment on humanity? Maybe there is no God anyway, and the question itself is redundant.



The great biblical writer, King David, addressed the subject, and in a way silenced the debate with the simplicity of his answer. In what must be one of the most beautiful and poignant spiritual songs ever written, David explains that the moment of death, however horrific it may be and no matter in what desolate place it occurs, is not a loss of hope. Rather, he continues, death is a point of

contact with the life-giving Spirit of God.


Listen to what he says: "Where shall I go from your Spirit?...if I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast" (Psalm 139:7-10 NIV UK).

David's words comfort all of us. They give hope, not only to those caught up in tragic events, but to everyone when faced with our own death or when a loved one dies. The Spirit of God is everywhere: therefore we are not alone. When we die, the next moment of awareness is with God, who comforts us and gives us grace through

his resurrected son, Jesus Christ.

Let's not forget those involved with flight MH 370, and pray that God will keep them safe.

And - when the worst happens - let's remember that, as David wrote, even in death God's right hand holds us fast.



"DON'T CRY FOR JESUS"

BY GARY DEDDO

“Don’t Cry for Jesus” was one of the most memorable sermons I have ever heard. It was given by Dr. Lewis Smedes at a Fuller Seminary chapel service.

What was Professor Smedes getting at that struck me as being so profoundly right? He wanted us to see as clearly and precisely as possible that Jesus was no victim and that he didn’t want us to pity him or feel sorry for him. I thought at the time, “What? How can we not feel sorry for him after all he went through for us?” As Smedes developed the message I saw what he meant and how true it was.

Professor Smedes had us consider two things: first, the actual way the story of Jesus is told to us by the New Testament writers and second, a comparison of Jesus with the Greek tragic heroes like the demigod Achilles.

Let me first briefly recount for you the upshot of that comparison. The Greek gods, as great as they were, suffered often because of their own immoral activities and those involving the other gods. But their greatest sufferings were tragic because they were due to circumstances beyond their own control. These gods were born with their various strengths and weaknesses. No one of them “had it all.” They were always born into situations not of their own making and often involving jealousies, revenge plots and grabs for power between various other gods.

These tragic heroes were always victims of their circumstances as the inevitable wheel of fate at some point turned against them. But it was their vulnerabilities that would inevitably lead to their most tragic suffering and defeat, like Achilles’ lamentable heel. Were it not for the fact that despite all his armour, Achilles’ heel was exposed and that his goddess mother was prevented by his unwitting mortal father from completing the daily rituals that would have made Achilles immortal, Paris’ arrow would never have found its fatal target. In some versions of the myth, the god Apollo, for his own reasons, intervened and guided that arrow to pierce Achilles just at that one and only tiny unprotected point. How can you not feel sorry for Achilles? The unfairness of it all. Through no fault of his own, the greatest of all Greek warriors was brought down.

Though we certainly don’t think of Jesus as a Greek tragic hero, I realized upon further reflection that his cross is often described in tragic terms. Jesus is often portrayed as a victim of circumstances that go all the way back to the fall of humanity. Jesus is sent to be our Saviour because humanity has rebelled and needs to be reconciled and regenerated if we are to share in God’s eternal and triune fellowship and communion and for God’s original intention at creation to be realized.

In the New Testament we find Jesus, the Son of God, living at a time when the Jewish nation is occupied by

the pagan Romans. Among his own people, the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders, are involved in their own disputes with each other. Yet they manage to form an alliance to plot Jesus' arrest and execution. Closer to him, there is a traitor among his own disciples, Judas, who betrays him—with a kiss, no less. Jesus is betrayed first into the hands of the court of the high priests and then into the hands of Pilate, who is himself caught between the rival forces of the Emperor and the potentially riotous crowds.

Finally, Jesus suffers the brutally cruel treatment of the Roman soldiers who strip, mock and whip him, then lead him to Golgotha where he is put to death on the machinery of Roman execution, a cross.

Given these tragic circumstances surrounding Jesus' sacrifice, why should we not consider Jesus a tragic victim? Not because he didn't pay an unimaginably high price for us and our salvation. Not because he didn't actually suffer and die. But simply because he was no victim of those circumstances and because he had no fatal flaw!

The cost of our salvation was foreseen and anticipated before the foundations of the earth were even laid. God was not taken by surprise at the Fall nor by our subsequent need for costly deliverance. But our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, counted the cost (as it were) from all eternity and agreed they were ready and willing to gladly pay the price for our deliverance from evil and for our reconciliation. So the plan for creation was carried out knowing full well the price to be paid to put things right, for God's righteousness to be done.

Jesus knew why he had come and what his saving work would cost. His mission was freely chosen. He was freely sent and freely given by the Father out of their joint abounding love for the world. Jesus repeatedly told his disciples what he would have to go through, even though they could not imagine his being so completely rejected by their religious leaders and political authorities that it would lead to his death. Jesus was anything but unaware, naive, about the path he would have to take to make all things new.

Jesus tells us that, like a good shepherd, when danger comes to his sheep, he lays his life down—and also takes it up (John 10:17). Jesus freely, voluntarily, not

only gives up his life but also receives it back. When Pilate thinks he has to remind Jesus that he has the power of life and death over him, Jesus has to remind Pilate that he has no power except what has been allowed him by God, his Father (John 19:10-11).

In the garden, when one of his disciples takes it upon himself to defend Jesus with a sword, Jesus reminds them that all of his Father's angelic hosts are available to protect him at any moment if he were to call on them (Matthew 26:53). Jesus is no victim of fate, of circumstances, or of powers greater than himself. He is in charge. He goes forth to Jerusalem only when his hour has come—not sooner, not later.

Jesus' suffering is not the result of any large or small flaw in him. Far from it. There is not even a fleeting shadow of personal weakness evident in his confident exercise of divine omnipotence as he fulfills his redemptive mission. Rather it is by means of his strength and authority operating in full concert with his Father that he arrives at

the right moment to exert saving power over sin, evil and death itself. His act of self-giving is a work of deliberate might based on the strength of his holy love.

Jesus is no tragic hero, but the willing, omnipotent, Lord and Saviour.

Perhaps most astonishing are Jesus' words spoken on the way to Golgotha, even as he bore the heavy weight of the cross-beam of his own crucifixion. Behold-

ing the women standing by, no doubt exceedingly distraught and anguished, welling up from the depths of his compassion, Jesus found the strength to tell them something they and we need to know: "Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for me" (Luke 23:28).

Jesus does not want us to pity him as a hapless victim who suffers because it couldn't be avoided, because it was inevitable, destined by forces he could not resist. He is not looking for our pity—he trod that road, the Via Dolorosa as it is called, on purpose, by divine design. He intentionally took that journey and nothing, not even torture at the violent hands of human wickedness, could stop him. We may weep for ourselves, if we must, that is, be sorrowful for our sins. But Jesus didn't come looking to gather our tears. Rather his costly love calls for giving him our thanks, our praise, our gratitude, our love, our absolute trust and loyalty—indeed our very



Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)
by Antonio Ciseri c. 1880

lives in eternal worship.

Jesus not only freely but also gladly gave his life that we might have resurrected life in him. So the author of Hebrews sums it up: “For the joy set before him, he endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2).

For joy? Yes, for joy. But how can that be? In short, because Jesus was no fool. The price he paid was worth it and he knew it. He has no regrets! He did not enjoy the suffering. Not at all. It was excruciating. But he rejoiced in what he with the Father and Spirit would accomplish by means of his extravagant self-sacrifice. Jesus was no victim but the victor. The certainty of his victory gave him a great joy that saw him through his agonies. Crucifixion would lead by the grace and power of God to resurrection and a new heaven and earth.

Jesus was no reluctant Saviour but the conquering Servant-King of all creation.

That’s the good news that Professor Smedes preached and from that moment on, I saw that I could no longer think, preach or teach as if Jesus was a victim that we should feel sorry for.

All those illustrations of the cross that I had heard in both liberal and conservative Christian contexts that made it seem that Jesus was a victim, I had to forswear. These made Jesus out to be anything and everything—from a mother rabbit frozen in a blizzard to save her little bunny child, to an innocent toddler run over by a train or ground up in the gears of a drawbridge—all this occurring while his helpless father looks on in horror from a distance. Somehow caught off-guard and facing a horrible dilemma, this father-victim had to choose between his son and humanity. And so he pulls the lever that seals their respective fates. In these illustrations both the Son and the Father are depicted as victims of circumstances and of their own limitations that call for our pity. As tragic characters they match, if not exceed, the sorry state memorialized in the myth of Achilles.

Perhaps more theological than these misguided analogies are certain interpretations of the cross that pit the Father against the Son. The Father is sometimes said to be taking his wrath out on the Son—punishing him to satisfy his righteousness. In this case, the tragedy occurs between the Father and the Son (some, who have rejected the idea of the cross altogether, have gone so far as to claim that if so, the Father is the victimizer and the Son the victim!). Or the Son is depicted as having to overcome the resistance of the Father to being merciful and forgiving by appealing to his own suffering to gain

the Father’s pity and so get him to relent of his wrath. From these perspectives, the wills, attitudes and aims of the Father and the Son are at odds and can be resolved only by the Son’s suffering. How tragic! “Only that it wasn’t so!” we reply out of pity.

Sometimes we imagine a modern adversarial court scene where the Father is represented as the judge who wants to condemn the guilty party, and Jesus is the defense lawyer hoping to help the defendant avoid the penalty required by the law. Fortunately, Jesus figures out a way to keep us from the punishment we deserve. It’s a plan that the Father can’t argue with since it doesn’t seem to involve any violation of the law. Finding no grounds for objection, the Father-Judge has to concede: Jesus wins the court case for us.

But the biblical revelation shows us the Triune God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who are of one mind, one purpose, united in being and in act all for the one and same end, our salvation. The Father sends the Son in the power of the Spirit. The Son freely comes and serves out of love for the Father and with joy in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers the Son to overcome temptation and undo evil itself in order to set free the captives, open the eyes of the blind, set at liberty those who are oppressed and bring in the Lord’s promised Jubilee (Luke 4:18-19).

At the cross, no exception is made. Our sin is judged and condemned in Jesus. The wrath of God aims to burn away evil and the sin in us that has corrupted our very natures. Dying in him we are separated and rescued from the evil in us for eternal life. We are given a share in Christ’s restored and sanctified humanity. God’s wrath serves his mercy. His righteousness serves his love. There is no tension between the attributes of God nor between the Father and the Son. There is no tragic relationship at the heart of the gospel. At the cross the Son “through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished [without flaw] to God” (Hebrews 9:14). Our salvation is the united work of the whole Triune God, our Saviour—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

At the foot of the cross, Christ doesn’t call us to join him in a great pity-party: the Father feeling sorry for the Son, the Son feeling sorry for the Father, Jesus feeling sorry for us and we feeling oh so sorry for him. For Jesus was no tragic victim. Rather, we gather at the foot of the cross to worship in unspeakable awe, with adoration, thanksgiving, praise and prayer for the costly victory of Christ. By his joyful and freely given life, he righteously restored us to fellowship and eternal communion with God our Triune Redeemer.



A Hard's Day Night

by Hilary Jacobs

It looked like being a good evening's entertainment.

The main characters were played by an academy award winner and a nominee, and it was categorized in the romance section of our local library. A bit of an escape from the hard cold realities of this world was just what we needed after watching the news. So we had pleasant expectations as we switched on our DVD player.

But it was not to be. The opening scenes were about a husband and wife having a succession of arguments where nobody wins. She 'didn't want to talk about it,' and he got angry and frustrated as all his efforts to resolve the crisis got blown away like a feather. For the next two hours the story 'progressed' from arguments to adultery, to abortion and finally suicide.

No redemption, no resolution, no happy ending. We felt cheated and let down.

Thinking about it the next morning I realized it was probably a pretty accurate picture of how life might have been in suburbia of the 50s in the USA. The husband had a well paying job, they lived in a stylish house, had one large car, two small children, some good friends and everything a stay-at-home wife and mother could wish for. Or did they? Apparently not. She wanted something more than the boring life. Emigrate to another country, take up a new career, a new lover. Anything but dull domesticity.

There's a story in the Bible about a king who reached a plateau of success in his military career. God had given him victory in the battles he had fought and a period of

peace was enjoyed by the nation of Israel. I'm talking about King David – the only king who earned the description "a man after God's own heart." The story of his encounter with Bathsheba and the resulting pregnancy, death of the child and tragic aftermath are well known. It started with things going smoothly for David.

As he relaxed on the roof of his palace one evening he saw a beautiful woman bathing. Though we are not quite sure how ancient architecture allowed for this kind of observation, David was determined from that moment to 'hook up' with her. Adultery was followed by murder to cover up the sin, and then finally David was brought face to face with reality by the prophet Nathan. The child Bathsheba bore him died within a week in spite of David's repentance and fasting.

A sad ending, or at least it might have been had David gone the same route as the wife in the movie. She clung to her obstinate obsession with a change of bed partners or a change of country, even though it was clearly impractical and morally perilous. She wouldn't let go of what she wanted. The movie ended with a carefully planned deception and then self inflicted abortion and death. A hollow depressing outcome.

Forgetting the past

But David had a complete change of heart and turned his life around. He pleaded with God: "Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart O God and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51: 9-11). He could have wallowed in his grief and misery, but he determined to get

his life back on track. After worshipping God he went back home and ordered a fine dinner. Psalm 22 is known to prophetically describe the suffering of Jesus, but no doubt the words penned by David came straight from the heart. He had more than his fair share of troubles. But the last few verses of the same psalm (25-31) show a clear picture of what David (and everyone else) can look forward to. “The whole earth will acknowledge the Lord and return to him. All the families of the nations will bow down before him” (verse 27 NLT).

Just like David, the apostle Paul looked ahead and pressed towards the goal of God’s Kingdom “...but one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus”(Philippians 3:13-14).

Of course, the movie was just a story, but how often in our lives don’t we get tempted to indulge in some kind of off-beat experience when things are running smoothly? Perhaps it’s a case of ‘the devil makes work for idle hands,’ or we don’t feel the need to stay close to God, so we are caught off guard. Maybe a bit of both.

Everything to look forward to

Though stay-at-home moms are rare today, the movie type of tragedy with some variations, is most likely played out in many lives today. Not necessarily with the same dramatic ending, but with a feeling of hopelessness and failure. A dead end, no redemption and nothing to look forward to.

But the truth is, all humanity has everything to look forward to. Paul was allowed a brief glimpse of what God has prepared for the human race, and it was too wonderful to describe (2 Corinthians 12:3-4). This is what Jesus’ sacrifice was all about – making us into new people – people he would like to spend eternity with.

But what about the here and now? How do we cope with all our troubles in this evil world? What will keep us going to the end? Jesus promised his disciples that the Comforter, or Holy Spirit would be with them right through their lives and with us all to the end of the age. It’s a gift we can ask for with complete confidence that it will be granted. Like David we can be reassured that even in

our darkest moments, God is with us (Psalm 23:4).

The sooner the good news of his love, healing and forgiveness is made known, the more lives will be turned around and straightened out. The salvation we have is the ultimate blessing, so great we want to ‘pay it forward’ by sharing the good



news with others.

As children of God we are blessed with the knowledge that God has forgiven even our rottenest sins and he sees us as completely righteous.

What kind of love is that?

Much more than we can measure.

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Speaking of Life:



Walking in Circles

Want to try something interesting? Take a friend to an open space, blindfold them and instruct them to walk as far as they can in a straight line. You'll be surprised to see what happens. For some reason, when people can't see their goal, they cannot walk in a straight line. And it's not just when blindfolded. When it is cloudy and visibility is low the same phenomenon occurs; people slip into walking in circles, and sometimes they end up right back where they started.

No one seems to know why this happens, but I find it fascinating that the phenomenon occurs. I also find it interesting that many use the phrase, "I feel like I'm walking in circles" to describe their personal or spiritual life at times. This feeling of walking in circles and getting nowhere happens when we lose sight of our goals.

The Bible calls this walking in darkness. When we walk in darkness, we are like the blindfolded friend who simply cannot walk in a straight line. It is because we've lost sight of Jesus. He is the light that enables us to walk straight. Notice what Jesus said about himself in John 8:12. **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."**

This "light of life" is also referred to in the first chapter of John where we read about the Word, Jesus, becoming flesh. It says in verse 4-5: **"In him was life,**

and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

This is good news for all who feel they've been walking in circles. When you walk with Christ, you no longer walk in darkness because the light has overcome it. Jesus illuminates the path enabling you to walk in the light. He is also the goal you stay focused on enabling you to walk to the light. And he is the friend who accompanies you enabling you to walk with the light. If you start to meander or walk in a circle – which we all do from time to time – he is there to lovingly guide you back to the right path.

He does this because he loves you and doesn't want you to be frustrated walking in circles and going nowhere. He wants you to have the light of life.

It may be fun to take your friend to an open space, blindfold them and have them try to walk in a straight line. But that's nothing compared to the joy of seeing your friend walk from darkness into the light of Christ.

I'm Joseph Tkach, Speaking of LIFE.

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