



Finding God in Times of Tragedy

| *Our job is to show God's compassionate concern.*

Introduction

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, defines *tragedy* as “any event with a sad and unfortunate outcome.” With this definition in mind, it is not difficult to see that tragedies are all around us and difficult to escape. Tragedies, however, may seem even more prevalent to young people.

Depending on the growth and development of the youth, tragedies may be as close to home as losing a best friend, being cut from the team, or not being accepted into a particular college. At the same time, it takes only one day of listening to the world news with “tragedy ears” to become aware of the vast amount of bad news being pounded into the heads and hearts of those who will be gathered in the room during this session. From war to hurricanes to child abuse to gang violence, we cannot escape the knowledge that bad things happen.

The Bible is full of accounts of people who suffered greatly, people for whom bad things were prevalent. One of these persons was Job. In the Old Testament, the book of Job tells the story of his life. With his family dead, all of his possessions gone, and sores on his body, he is left with friends questioning the involvement of God in the midst of the heartache. They blame Job for his suffering. Without an explanation about why bad things happen, however, God is there.

This pattern of God's presence in the midst of terrible events is constant throughout the Bible. In the book of Genesis, God, in the midst of disappointment with the people just created, provided clothing for Adam and Eve as they went out into the world. Later in the Old Testament, the people of Israel suffered in slavery in Egypt. God called Moses to save them and lead them into a free land. In the Gospels, we learn about Christ's

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Form clay into examples of tragedy.

GATHERING

- Describe experiences of compassion.

OPENING

- Lead opening prayer.
- Define tragedy.
- Discuss reasons given for tragedies.

EXPLORING

- Reflect on handout and Scripture.

RESPONDING

- Commit to ways of practicing compassion.
Use rubber bands.

CLOSING

- Transform clay images from tragedy to compassion.
- Say the final prayer.

mission. The great teacher, the Son of God, God's presence in the flesh, ministers with the blind, the sick, and the outcast. Throughout all of these experiences, explanations are not primary; God is.

Scripture also suggests that the presence of God, this response to tragedy, is most easily recognized through one another. God liberated the children of Israel through Moses. God demanded justice for the poor through the voices of Isaiah, Amos, and the other prophets. Jesus gave his followers only one commandment: to love one another.

The teachings and actions of Christ give us a kind of pattern about where to look for God in tragedy. When neighbors bring casseroles to the bereaved in the midst of grief, when strangers pull the drowning from floodwaters or lift stones off those crushed under an avalanche, when tender hands comfort and kind words console, we can be aware of the blowing of the Holy Spirit. When hearts become stable in the midst of tragedy and communities stand firm in the midst of spiraling rage, we feel the Spirit in our midst.

We do not see in Scripture evidence that God removes the causes of suffering but rather that God comes to us in the midst of suffering. Therefore, we do not look for God in the explanations of tragedy; we look for God in the compassionate responses to tragedy. The book of the same name says this about compassion:

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.¹

When we practice compassion for one another, we bear witness to the fact that God is with us. In order to develop the mind and heart that learn to look for God in tragedy, it is necessary to practice all the time. We practice when we are present in prayer and when we focus our sorrow on the tragedy of others for one minute longer than is comfortable. We practice when we consider a situation from the perspective of our enemy or when we find time for silence in the presence of God. We practice when we try to love God more than our ideas about God.

The group gathered for this session may be anxious for answers to the reasons for tragedy. The session, however, is not about answers but, instead, more about the response. Keep this in mind throughout the session. Focus on the compassionate aspect while remembering how difficult the compassionate response can be in the midst of the strong peer pressure that is often a large part of the lives of young people. Acting on the compassionate response sometimes means stepping out and following the path not always taken by the majority.

Goal for the Session

In this session, participants will think about new ways of seeing God in the midst of tragedy and consider spiritual practices of compassion that prepare us for responding to difficulty.

Preparing for the Session

Pray for the individuals who will be engaged in this session. If possible, pray for each by name, asking for the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, that they may hear, understand, and be called to action. While remembering each of these young people, review the “Teaching Alternatives” section and determine whether one of these activities might be more appropriate for the group. Because of differing learning styles and disastrous events that may have taken place recently, one or more of these activities may be substituted.

Notice whether there are any major news stories, local events, or events in the lives of the young people that might make this subject particularly vivid or current. Finding concrete ways of making the situation real and, perhaps, more personal can make it more difficult to retreat to glib answers and therefore more necessary to confront the theological issues in fresh ways.

Have butcher paper or newsprint and markers or chalkboard and chalk available. Use these to write down ideas from participants as a way of remembering the conversation, assisting visual learners, and also affirming different points of view.

Provide copies of the Participant Handout, enough small lumps of modeling clay or Play-Doh for each person, permanent markers and pens, and thick rubber bands (these are available in many colors at office supply stores).

If the group is small, all of the activities found in the Participant Handout will be appropriate. The handout includes two sections for reading and discussion as well as a third section of more active exploration. If, on the other hand, you are aware that you may have less time than the session allows because your group includes more than eight to ten participants, consider using the first two sections of the Participant Handout, leaving the third section for another gathering of the group.



Teaching Tips

- Many young people have not had opportunities to experience life and culture outside their own neighborhood, school, or city. Still others have had experiences that have led them to exotic locales and have interests that have increased their cultural knowledge. Be aware of the fact that both of these extremes may exist within the group. Assist the young people in remaining sensitive to and open with each other and in the ways they interact.
- Working in small groups gives the less-vocal participants a greater opportunity to speak and a higher comfort level. Make a plan for dividing into small groups to prevent the same young people from being together each time. Consider dividing by shirt color or birthday month or simply counting off.

Arriving (10 minutes)

Have various sizes and colors of lumps of modeling clay or Play-Doh available as the participants enter. Invite each person to form clay into a structure that demonstrates his or her view of tragedy. You may ask the question, “What does tragedy look like to you?” to get them thinking about what they will create.

Gathering (5 minutes)

As the group begins the time together, invite each person to share an experience in which he or she showed compassion to another person. It may be helpful to give a brief description of compassion (see “Introduction for Leader”) and encourage the group members to think about compassionate experiences that have happened recently, perhaps within the last week.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Praying Together

Use the following prayer, or one like it, as you gather:

Holy God, your face shines throughout the world. There is nowhere and no situation where you are not found. We pray for your healing presence with those here and those around the world. During this time together, guide our thoughts and hearts as we seek to serve you better. In Jesus’ name we pray.
Amen.

2. Thinking about Tragedies

Invite the participants to form a definition of *tragedy*. As the definition is formed, write the ideas on the board or newsprint. If the group gets stumped, consider reading the definition from a dictionary and using it as a starting point. Once the definition is created and agreed on by the group, encourage the participants to call out events that meet that definition. Write these underneath or alongside the definition. Consider allowing each participant to give a brief sentence or two about the structure created in the “Arriving” section.

Invite the group members to briefly describe the responses that people have given as to where God was to be found in any particular tragedy or why people said the tragedy occurred if they included God as allowing it to happen. To inspire this discussion, use the following questions: “In the wake of a world tragedy such as a flood, tsunami, hurricane, or earthquake, what did you hear people saying about God’s involvement?” and “When you think about events in your own life that might qualify as tragedies, what questions about God were you asking?” Write these on another piece of paper or section of the board. As each is mentioned, talk together about whether this response is helpful or not. Try not to focus on any one response for too long. Providing answers about God’s involvement is not the objective at this point; talking through common responses is.

Exploring (15 minutes)

3. Reflecting Together

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout to the group members. Because young people can be intimidated by their peers, consider dividing the group into three small groups or triads for this discussion.

You may have time only to do this first activity. Have each group read the section on the Participant Handout titled “Acting on Compassion.” Assign each group a Scripture, have one person in the group read it aloud, and give the group five minutes to prepare a news report they will give to the larger group.

If there is time, staying in small groups, invite participants to read the section titled “Living Compassion” on their handout. Encourage groups to give a very brief

time to name small and big acts of compassion to tragedies they have witnessed in their lives.

Responding (5 minutes)

4. Practicing Compassion

In the midst of tragedy, compassion can be difficult to achieve if not practiced constantly. Challenge the participants to commit to ways of practicing compassion in their everyday lives. These commitments can be made more concrete by creating a reminder. Distribute a thick rubber band to each participant along with a fine-tipped permanent marker or pen. Invite each person to write out a shortened version of his or her commitment on the band. Encourage everyone to wear the bands on their wrists as a reminder.

Examples of small steps to living a life of compassion might be these:

- Pray following news reports of people experiencing tragedy, and continue the prayer well past the media reports.
- Imagine what might be going through the mind of a person who has engaged in a horrifying act; imagine living in his or her shoes.
- Consider a situation from the perspective of the opposition or the enemy.
- Take time to actively pray for others, remembering their situations and events taking place in their lives.

Closing (5 minutes)

5. Moving from Tragedy to Compassion

Invite each person to turn tragedy into compassion by changing the tragedy structures made in the “Arriving” section into new images of compassion. Talk together about the transformation from tragedy to compassion—how it feels and how the structures have changed.

6. Praying for Compassion

Demonstrate the practice of compassion by joining together in prayer. Invite the participants to offer the name of a tragedy or a disastrous experience aloud. After each is mentioned, join in unison saying, “May God’s compassion be seen through us.”

Teaching Alternatives

Practice of Examen

Sit in silent prayer for two to four minutes before beginning your discussion. If the group needs instruction in this practice, you can suggest that they try the following:

Count their breath, that is, very calmly inhale and exhale, focusing on the breath itself or counting each breath up to ten and then starting over.

Choose a simple word (*love, Jesus*, and so on) to hold in their minds. As their minds wander, simply call attention back to the word.

Navigating Differences

As a way of practicing compassion in the midst of tragedy, see if this group can navigate its differences of opinion in ways that soften rather than reinforce these differences. Even if the group cannot agree, in what ways can it continue to witness to the love of God for one another?

Responding in Community

For a community response to the compassionate commitments in the “Responding” section, post a large piece of butcher paper or a paper tablecloth on the wall of the meeting space. In large letters write, “We commit to practicing compassion.” Invite the group members to add their commitment to the paper. Leave this poster, and refer to it often as the group meets at other times.

Today’s News

Read a story from today’s newspaper. Examine the story from several different angles: for example, the victims of suffering, the perpetrator(s) of suffering, other people who are affected, the context in which such a situation can arise. Imagine seeing each part of this through the eyes of divine compassion, and imagine a retelling of the story from each perspective.

Clips of Compassion

To delve further into the media issues, record portions of television shows that intersperse tragedy with scenes and visions of luxury, wealth, and extravagance. Show these clips to the group to spur discussion about how

we can become immune to the suffering of others and the need for compassion in the world.

Acts of Compassion

Make a group commitment to be engaged more fully in a compassionate response to a tragedy. Consider taking a mission trip to help rebuild houses, for example. Together, research the needs that remain in areas all across the country and the world. If travel is not an option, think about something that can be done locally. Gift of the Heart Kits for Church World Service, for example, can be assembled by the young people and then distributed to places around the globe. See “For More Information” for contact information.

Key Scriptures

There are many Scripture passages that speak to this subject, including the following:

Job 42

Psalm 18:1–6, 16–19

Jeremiah 32:9–15 or 33:4–15

Jonah 4:9–11

Habakkuk 3:17–19

Matthew 25:31–46

Romans 8:37–39

For More Information

Barbara L. Battin, *Shaken Foundations: A Resource for Young Adults Whose Parents Are Divorcing* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2006).

Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001).

Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986).

Bob Tuttle, *Dealing with Crisis* (Louisville: Bridge Resources, 1997).

Many denominations have areas specifically focused on responding to worldwide tragedies. Contact your denominational offices or visit their Web site to learn more about the compassionate responses made through your denomination.

Many organizations exist for the sole purpose of assisting people who have experienced tragedies of many kinds, offering compassionate responses in God’s name. A few of those organizations are listed here:

Habitat for Humanity, <http://www.habitat.org>

Church World Service, <http://www.churchworldservice.org>

The Salvation Army, <http://www.salvationarmyusa.org>

Projects may also be available through organizations such as these:

American Red Cross, <http://www.redcross.org>

VolunteerMatch, <http://www.volunteermatch.org>

About the Author

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Endnote

1. Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 4.

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