

HAVE WE BEEN DECEIVED?

Tragedy—the Greeks had a whole series of plays where something goes bad and called them “tragedies.” Shakespeare’s most famous plays like “Macbeth” and “Romeo and Juliet” are tragedies. Here is a list of recent movies about tragedies:

9/11 - based on the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center

Brian's Song - based on the life and 1970 death of football player Brian Piccolo

Elephant - based on the 1999 Columbine High School shooting

Hotel Rwanda - based on the 1994 Rwandan genocide

The Killing Fields - based on the 1973 Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia

Mississippi Burning - based on the 1964 murder of three civil rights activists

Munich - based on the killings of 11 members of the 1972 Israeli Olympic team

Patriots Day - based on the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing

The Perfect Storm - based on the 1991 deaths of the *Andrea Gail* fishing crew

Selena - based on the life and 1995 death of singer Selena Quintanilla-Pérez

Schindler's List - based on the Jewish Holocaust during World War II

Titanic - based on the 1912 *Titanic* ship collision and sinking

Even when these movies are about something like 9-11 in which many are killed, the movies focus on individuals who suffer. Joseph Stalin put it real coldly when he said, “The death of millions is a statistic; the death of one person is a tragedy.” We can definitely see that in the pandemic where people who have actually lost loved ones to the disease are far more affected.

What makes tragedy even more hurtful is when it is not only individual, but so disappointing. I have told the true story of the woman who wanted more than anything to be a wife and mother, but she was single. She resolved herself to accepting her singleness until she met a man and fell in love. He was a good man, but they were unable to have children. They tried and tried, but she came to accept that she would not bear children until seemingly miraculously she got pregnant. Her prayers had been answered! She was so careful during the pregnancy. She gave birth to a healthy daughter. God had so blessed her! But then a month later the girl suddenly died. The woman was crushed. How could God get hers hopes so high only to have her fall so tragically!

That is how Jeremiah feels in chapter 20.

O LORD, You have deceived me, and I was deceived; You are stronger than I, and You have prevailed.

Jeremiah's words are called a "lament." He is seen as the author of a whole book—Lamentations—which is a lament. Laments were often accompanied by dressing in sackcloth, lying in ashes, fasting, and weeping—kind of like Job in his suffering.

So why is Jeremiah complaining? In the words earlier in chapter 20 we read this:

Now Pashhur the priest, the son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. Then Pashhur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the Lord.

We hear from Jeremiah the consequences of this confrontation:

The next day, when Pashhur released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, "The LORD does not call your name Pashhur, but Terror on Every Side." I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, 'Violence and destruction!' For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.

Jeremiah has been telling people a message they don't want to hear. They will be punished by foreign invaders because they do not obey God. They get tired of hearing this. They throw it back on Jeremiah. Pashhur, the priest, strikes Jeremiah and puts him in stocks. The stocks are uncomfortable and can lead to pain, but worse they are humiliating. Pashhur and the people throw back his message of "terror on every side" at him.

People who work in sales say you try to reach 100 people, hope that 10 will listen, and one will buy what you are offering. That can be real emotionally draining, like it is for people in telemarketing. Psychologists tell us that it takes ten compliments to equal one criticism. Jeremiah has been led by God to proclaim a message that no one wants to hear. On top of this God has required him to be celibate as we read in chapter 16. This is especially crushing in a culture in which a man's greatest legacy is his sons.

And what does Jeremiah see as the cause of this?

If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in His name,' there is in my heart as if it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

Jeremiah would like nothing better than to “retire,” to let “someone younger” do the work of the prophet, but God’s message is so binding, he can’t let go. He feels that God has sold him a bill of goods and gypped him. He is accusing God of using His position of authority to take advantage of him. He is at the edge of blasphemy.

Do we feel “deceived” by God? How can God “disappoint” us?

The people of Judah that Jeremiah speaks to might feel deceived by God. Listen to what God tells Jeremiah in chapter 24:

After Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem, Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen, and the metal workers, and had brought them to Babylon, the LORD showed me this vision: behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the LORD. One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. And the LORD said to me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" I said, "Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten."

Then the word of the LORD came to me: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be My people and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart.

"But thus says the LORD: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers."

The people want to put their trust in what they can see and control. They are still in the land and have the temple in Jerusalem. Those who have already been taken into captivity in Babylon are hundreds of miles away. They are far from the temple. They seem to have no future. But God is saying that there is no hope in the present kingdom of Judah. They will be overthrown. They cannot rescue themselves by diplomacy or trusting in the temple. Instead the future lies with those in captivity, those who have no hope on their own. The captives are those who will only be restored by the work of God.

It is the same with the people who see Jesus. They hope for Him to be the new King David who will start a revolution, overthrow the Romans, and rule as the Old Testament nation. This is something they will do together with Him. But instead Jesus lets them down. The 5,000

who fed were ready to get more food from Him, but when he told them about “spiritual food,” they left Him. When He allows His enemies to arrest Him, the disciples flee. It looks as though He has been deceiving them.

We are “deceived” by God when we focus on our way of seeing things. We ask God, “If only You would do this.” We, like Jeremiah, are holding God to promises He has never made to us. God never has promised to save us by the way we think makes most sense. Otherwise Jesus would not have gone to cross and rose on Easter.

God listens to Jeremiah’s lament. He doesn’t send a lightning bolt to destroy Pashhur and those who persecute Jeremiah. But by listening and holding to His promises He gives Jeremiah the strength to hang in there. Listen to how Jeremiah’s lament ends:

But the LORD is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O LORD of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see Your vengeance upon them, for to You have I committed my cause. Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For He has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.

God would rescue the captives from Babylon, not as they revolted, but as God sent the Persians to conquer Babylon and then allow captives to return. Yet, that was only a “sneak preview” of what God would do in Jesus. Jesus came to remove the yoke of our sin, the sin that not only enslaves us, but makes us the idiots in the stocks who are to be mocked. On the cross He was totally “taken advantage of” in our place. And He is there today to free us from the yoke of tragedy, not by doing what we might expect, but by giving us the faith to endure it. That’s why God tells this to Jeremiah in chapter 30:

And it shall come to pass in that day, declares the LORD of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off your neck, and I will burst your bonds, and foreigners shall no more make a servant of him. But they shall serve the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.”

“Then fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the LORD, nor be dismayed, O Israel; for behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with you to save you, declares the LORD.