

Why?

God’s Sufficiency when He Allows a Tragedy

Adapted from a *Leadership Journal* article, Fall, 2006 by: James Rodgers

Verse for Today (vft)

“Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”

James 4:14—NIV 84

Over the last 30 years of ministry, I’ve administered scores of funerals, including for both of my parents—David Rodgers in 2006 and Sandy Rodgers in 2016. March 10, 2019 marked the 30th anniversary of my first funeral as a youth pastor in my mid 20’s.

With shock and disbelief, I asked, “They’re all dead?” Did I really hear what I thought I heard? The caller confirmed the facts. Our senior pastor’s wife and three children had been killed in a car accident that morning. The only survivor was the driver of the other car that hit them head-on (two other people in his car also died). His estimated speed was 75-90 miles per hour as he passed another car while going over a small rise on a country road. Her estimated speed was 45 miles per hour as she was taking her children to school. Melissa, Sherah, Shelah, and Jonathan Walden never had a chance.

I hung up the phone and told my wife what had happened. We were both numb. We prayed. We sought God’s wisdom, but didn’t know what to do next. I was in the seventh month of seminary and accepted this call to be a youth pastor to gain experience and apply the lessons learned in the classroom. But we never anticipated this kind of experience!

I had not taken any pastoral ministries courses. I didn’t know how to lead a funeral. I didn’t know how to comfort Pastor Jerry. He was older than me, and he was my overseer. I didn’t grasp how to provide a stabilizing presence in the midst of a crisis. Nonetheless, there I was—feeling “in over my head.”

My First Funeral: Four closed caskets filled the front of the church. The 900 people in attendance required overflow seating in the fellowship hall. Local newspaper and television reporters attended.

I was thankful for the other pastors involved. The dean of the seminary had been the family’s pastor while Jerry was in seminary, so he delivered the funeral sermon. Two other pastors—family friends—shared special music. The three of them represented years of ministry experience and training. However, I was the one they asked to step into the pulpit to offer the opening words.

The seminary dean, Pastor Plaster (technically it’s “Dr. Plaster,” but he enjoyed the smiles caused by “Pastor Plaster”), had discussed the whole service with me. He never talked down to me as a ministry novice, but sought my input. He even wanted me to select the Bible passages and asked me to deliver the opening comments since I represented a familiar face to the church. He also wanted me to lead in the prayer, eulogy, and the Scripture readings.

When I was uncertain what to do, I followed his lead. His years of pastoral experience showed in his message and his calming presence. Instead of attempting to act like a seasoned veteran, I honestly expressed the thoughts and questions in my mind. After welcoming people I said, “Right now, the question on everybody’s mind is ‘why?’ But as hard as we try, we can’t come up with any answers. We must trust in the fact that we have an all-powerful God. And, God makes no mistakes.”



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God's Sufficiency During a Tragedy: The accident occurred on a Friday morning. The Sunday before the accident, Pastor Jerry preached on James 4:13-17 (which includes the Verse for Today)—that our lives are a mist. In that message Jerry said, "None of us know. You can get up on Friday morning, kiss your wife good-bye and say, 'I'll see you tonight,' and we lose them in an accident." After the accident Jerry reflected, "But we just have to trust. We don't know, and we wouldn't want to know beforehand. We just have to come to that point in trust. I said this, not knowing that it would be my family that would be the ones I was speaking of."

In the months that followed, People often inquired how Pastor Jerry was dealing with his loss. Then, sometimes, they asked me how I was doing. My basic response became, "I know there are other pastors with more, and better, training to minister in this situation. But, for some reason—beyond my understanding—God chose me to be here at this time." Now, viewing this event through the lens of 30 years, I realize God was teaching me some very important lessons about ministry. Perhaps the most important is that God can use our inadequacy or inexperience as a launching pad to discover His sufficiency.

Ministry to a More Senior Pastor: After the accident it took a while for Pastor Jerry and I to resume our weekly meetings. And the content and tone changed. I know Jerry still wanted to mentor me, but understandably, his emotional reservoir ran low. Sometimes he just needed someone to share his hurting. I wanted to offer encouragement and support, but how? What did I really have to offer? So, often I found myself just listening. As he went through the grieving process, I tried to learn from his experience. He shared that one of the results of a dramatic separation like his is to feel uneasy about other existing relationships. Since he had lost those closest to him, he needed affirmation that others close to him would not be leaving as well. He just needed a listener.

Yet again, I wonder if my inexperience actually allowed God to use me more effectively. If I'd had more training, I might have tried to be a more active counselor and said something really dumb. Jerry shared some of the hurtful things that well-meaning people said. Some suggested, "God must have needed them more than you." Jerry said he wanted to scream, "God has the angels, the apostles, and all the saints of history, so why would God really need my wife and children?" Others offered, "It's just like what Job went through." But Jerry observed that Job still had his wife. Two different people actually approached Jerry to probe what sin his wife and children had committed. Now, that does sound like Job's experience with his "friends."

Jerry didn't mind silence with people. He just valued their presence and confirmation that the friendship still existed. Since that time, I've studied more about Job's experience and noticed that the three friends spent their first seven days in silent support of their friend (Job 2:13). Maybe that's what grieving people need most.

Caring Connections: Mary Ann and I had been married less than a year when the accident occurred. It impressed on us the fragility of life and the sufficiency of God's grace. Mary Ann worked as an RN at the only hospital in the county. So for six weeks after the accident, she would often serve alongside me in ministry situations and then go to the ICU and nurse back the health the only survivor and the one who caused the tragedy. We knew this was not coincidental, and it forced us to deal with issues of forgiveness and grace.

Many people sent Jerry cards, gifts, and affirmations of their concern. But we came up with the idea of becoming "secret interceders." We regularly sent him cards, gifts and affirmations, but we signed them, "Your Secret Interceders." Just before we left the church to move on to a senior pastor position, we revealed our identity. With euphoric warmth, Jerry shared that it had driven him crazy trying to figure out who it was. That was part of our intent, as it caused him to reflect on the many people who cared deeply and hurt with him. It also met a need in our lives, to take a painful event and look for creative ways to minister.

Because I witnessed his grief from a front row seat, I realized I can never fully comprehend what Pastor Jerry experienced. Many men would have completely crumbled and turned their backs on ministry—and even God. To Jerry's credit and evidence of God's grace, he didn't do that. Jerry served God at a Christian counseling ministry, specializing in grief counseling. He recently retired from this faithful ministry. No matter what, God's grace is **always sufficient**.

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