

JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN  
**Mission**

February 2015 | Vol. 2 | No. 1

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1333 S. Kirkwood Road,  
St. Louis, MO 63122-7294,  
314-996-1202

Published by The Lutheran Church—  
Missouri Synod.

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This journal may also be found at [www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission](http://www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission).

Member: Associated Church Press Evangelical Press Association (ISSN 2334-1998)  
A periodical of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Offices of National and International Mission.



# SHARING THE GOSPEL IN TIME OF SUFFERING

by Carl C. Fickenscher II

Does God's Word give us anything to say in times of disaster?

**I**N THE SPRING OF 2005, just a few months after the devastating tsunami in the Indian Ocean, Dec. 26, 2004, I had the — I think I can call it — the pleasure or the joy (while it was mixed with a lot that wasn't joy or pleasure at all) of touring, along with Synod President Harrison (who at the time was executive director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care), those places in India and Indonesia that were hit very hard. Our mission was certainly not to fix things by any means. We clearly understood that we were there to listen and to learn, and it was a learning experience if ever there could be one! It was a listening experience. In the process, many images were exceedingly memorable and painfully so.

And to me, the most memorable, and in a way the most painful, image actually was one day when we went to a fishing village in southern India, near the southern tip of India, and we visited a particular parish there. We arrived in the village, and the first thing we were shown was essentially the vacant lot next to the Roman Catholic parish house, which had become a cemetery for 380 members of this parish. It had been a vacant lot (or maybe it hadn't been vacant but had become vacant when the water rushed in), but now it was filled with the graves of members of this relatively small Catholic congregation in this fishing village. We then went in and visited with the local parish priest, a man in his thirties who had been there for just three or four years.

But that had included the very significant Sunday morning about five months before. Obviously some time had passed, and that was a chance for him to have some perspective, but in his sharing with us, it was still

very clear that he was emotionally and perhaps even spiritually *very* empty. Feeling the trauma to his parish — and imagine 380 funerals in a very short period of time and the kind of toll that took! — as we sat with him in his office (he was behind his desk and we were around the desk in front of him and asking questions), frankly, it was a matter of sensitivity. It couldn't be like doing an interview. It was very clear that he was having difficulty, even five months later, talking to us at all, though he was very gracious to invite us to be there. The words came so

painfully, so slowly.

He said when the tsunami happened, it was a Sunday morning. A week went by before Sunday worship services again. The following Sunday he did not feel up to addressing the disaster in the sermon. In fact, he said it was more than a month before he felt he could address it in a sermon at all. And even now as he described it, he described feeling very empty in addressing the question, even from God's Word. So traumatic! Such a

stressful event for him, he felt it was! And we understand that. Well, we actually can't begin to understand that, but we imagine. He had a difficult time finding anything that he felt God's Word would say to this situation. That's really the question I'd like to begin with: Does God's Word really give us anything to say in these times of suffering?

We know the answer is going to be yes. But we can imagine that in some moments, in some situations, it's difficult to find what God's Word says. It's also true that God's Word gives us a lot of cautions about some things not to say.

It's interesting: When you think about the Scriptures

Many things we might say are anything but comforting, but the cross of Christ, fully understood with all its ramifications, always gives us a word of comfort to share.

in light of situations like this, it's not quite as easy as we might think to find passages that really apply. You know that the Bible unquestionably does talk about all kinds of disasters. It talks about all kinds of crises. It talks about huge kind of cataclysms — like there was a really big flood once, and it wiped out a whole lot of people! And there have been plagues — ten of them in one shot once, and other plagues like in Jerusalem in the days of David when thousands were killed. And there've been wars that have ravaged God's people, and there's been fire sent down from heaven at dramatic moments when it would wipe out 50 soldiers once and 50 soldiers again and 50 soldiers a third time. Countless other such disasters occur in Holy Scripture. So you'd think the Bible would have answers for almost any crisis situation.

The interesting thing, though, is that as we begin to unpack those particular narratives, those historic events described in Scripture that describe these kinds of situations, the truth is, most of them don't fit all that well into the kinds of situations that we've been talking about. If you stop to think about that, I think it's really true. Those situations in Scripture, for the most part, are different from the situations we address in one of several ways. Sometimes in Scripture there's a clear explanation about God doing something as a direct punishment for some kind of sin. God sends the Babylonians to carry Judah off into captivity, and we know why. God sends a flood, and we know why. There's direct, clear punishment involved. On the other hand, for us, as we deal with disasters today, there's usually a total absence of explanation.

You think about the situation with Job. Although Job never gets an explanation, we've got one. We know there's that heavenly dialogue ahead of time that Job is unaware of even at the end of the book. In the Bible, we usually get some kind of explanation or some clear word that a disaster is a direct punishment for sin. In our day, we don't get that explanation. Of course, there are lots of other disasters or near-disasters in Scripture where God as Christ Himself during His ministry delivers people right there on the spot from starvation or from illness or from some other kind of suffering. But we usually don't see that happen in the disasters we face today.

### **Some Law for the preacher to hear**

With most of the crisis situations we address, we don't get a clear word if it is a punishment for sin nor do we get any other kind of explanation. And we aren't seeing Jesus enter the scene and still the storm. So when you stop to

think, it is probably not as easy as we might presume to find within the Bible ready, easy answers for suffering. Of course, the Bible has lots to say about these situations, but it's not as obvious as one might think.

This leads us to some important cautions. We'll identify these as "don'ts." This is "some Law for the preacher to hear." We'll also look at Gospel that the preacher absolutely *does* have to proclaim. But for now, let's talk about some cautions, some "don'ts," the six of them are wake-up calls in terms of God's Word in what it doesn't say or tells us not to say in times of responding to suffering. Some of these are fairly obvious. In our theology, they're fairly clear, but they're not so obvious to everybody else.

### **1. Don't presume to read God's mind.**

This of course is the matter of the *Deus absconditus* (the hidden will of God). Perhaps some of you here from the United States remember, in August 2012, Hurricane Isaac was coming out of the Caribbean and looked as if it was going to hit the mainland of the U.S. somewhere. Eventually it did. But it looked initially as if it was headed for Florida, and then it turned away and actually hit New Orleans, the same basic landing spot as Hurricane Katrina a number of years earlier. Pat Robertson — a televangelist in the United States, a non-denominational, evangelical Christian — decided he figured out what God had in mind. Guess what it was: the Republican National Convention was about to begin in Florida, and Pat Robertson decided that God had protected the Republicans. "Rejoice!" Or clear your throat and wonder if Pat Robertson was going where he might not have been wise to go. It's just possible that wasn't really what God had in mind.

Sometimes when we're addressing crises, we can fall into a similar fallacy. Job is the classic example here. God doesn't explain Himself to Job. God did tell us in chapters 1 and 2 what was going on. But then there's the lengthy dialogue between Job and his friends in chapter 3 all the way through chapter 37, and there's one speculation after another after another after another about what's on God's mind. Job's friends, they've got an answer. Job isn't too sure, and eventually Job loses that "patience of Job" and is ready to take God to task when God shows up finally in chapter 38.

Remember what God does in chapters 38 through chapter 42. What he *doesn't* do is say, "Hey, Job, you've been good about this. You've hung tough through all of

this, and you've finally reached the breaking point. Well, back in chapters 1 and chapter 2, see, there was this dialogue where the devil came before the sons of God and said, 'You know this guy Job. The only reason he's faithful to you is because you're making things so nice for him. If things get tough for him, he'll curse you to your face and die.' We, the readers, know that part of the story, and I almost wish God had told the poor guy. But He doesn't. In fact, what God says there from the whirlwind in chapter 38 and following is simply to say, essentially, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth, when I told the waves, thus far no farther?" Bottom line: "You're not getting that information out of me even now, Job." What God does tell Job is vastly more wonderful. But God doesn't give Job His explanation for what's been going on. And that's an important caution. We mustn't presume to read God's mind and try to explain why disasters have happened when God doesn't tell us.

## **2. Don't assign guilt where God's Word doesn't.**

This even sounds like an awful thing to do, and again, our theology warns us wisely against it. But it's not universal to recognize this as an error, not only among non-denominational evangelical Christians, but also among many of our own Lutheran members. I remember very vividly in my own experience in my last congregation one of my dear members, who served many years on the board of elders, had an automobile accident, and he was quite sure that he must be guilty of some particular sin that had caused his accident. He didn't know what the sin might be, but he was pretty sure that there must be something he had done that was the reason God caused this accident. The accident was very serious. He did survive, but it was very serious indeed.

Consider Hurricane Katrina, the other recent New Orleans hurricane, in August 2005. In the minds of some people, there was a clear explanation for why the hurricane happened. According to some, it was because of New Orleans' reputation as one of America's "sin cities." For them, this had to be the reason Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. We remember, of course, John chapter 9, where the disciples, like most of the Jews in Jesus' day, had that same line of thinking: The man is born blind; we know one of two things happened. Either he sinned before he was born, or his parents were guilty of some kind of sin before he was born. One or the other caused God to zap him with blindness from birth.

But Jesus says that's not it. Again, Jesus doesn't give us

the full explanation. He does tell us in this instance that it's going to be an opportunity for Christ Himself to give glory to God by working a wonderful miracle, which, again, we wish he'd do every time there's a disaster. But the point here is that the disciples weren't to see this man's blindness as God punishing him for some particular sin. In the same way, it's not for us to imagine that New Orleans is guiltier of sin than somewhere else, say, Houston, Texas, that Houston is spared and New Orleans is struck. When disasters or suffering strike, we mustn't presume to assign guilt where God's Word doesn't.

## **3. Don't assume the victims are innocent either.**

Some of you may remember that after the 9/11 tragedy, there was a widely circulated cartoon with the Twin Towers, that iconic view, and above it a cloud of three thousand souls going up to heaven. The implication was they were all innocents killed by terrorists, so people picture them innocently received into heaven. We'd like to think that everyone who dies in a tragedy automatically goes to heaven. That would be a cushion that would seem to make everything turn out better. But, of course, we know this is not the case. Remember in Luke chapter 13 the whole tower of Siloam thing? We can assume that those killed when that tower fell were innocent victims, and yet Jesus says, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). That wasn't specifically identifying those eighteen as *particularly* sinful, but it was recognizing that they, we, all, are anything but innocent. We are all sinful, not of a particular sin to which we could assign guilt for causing a disaster, but neither are we without sinful involvement in this fallen world. When disaster strikes, we mustn't speak as if those who died are automatically received into heaven, as if they were all innocent and holy and deserving of heaven.

## **4. Don't forget that "disaster" is whatever disaster is to the sufferer.**

A Doctor of Ministry graduate from our seminary a few years ago, Pastor Mark Nuckols, a very well-decorated U.S. Army chaplain, was called to his current parish in Austin, Texas, and it was a very short time thereafter when he was called up to deploy to Iraq. While deployed, he saw traumatic scenes one would expect a chaplain to see and minister to in war. Mark actually had two deployments to Iraq; another one just a couple of years later. He said that in his second return from deployment, he was a wiser pastor than he had been after the first

deployment, because he learned something. The first time when he came back, he would be sitting in his office, and he would have church members come to him with issues that were very important to them. They would say, “Pastor, I just lost my job,” or “Pastor, my son is having trouble in his high school.” And Pastor Nuckols confesses that that first time back, his reaction was, “Get a life! Guys are losing their lives where I just was. I was ministering to people who’d seen their friends blown apart. What’s the big problem? What’s the crisis? What’s the disaster?” Pastor Nuckols realized later that suffering is relative to the sufferer. A seemingly lesser issue to him was a disaster to the one suffering it. It was a very big deal to the church member going through it. It was a situation for which his pastoral care really needed to be every bit as sensitive as it had been eight thousand miles away a month earlier. In fact, the second time back from deployment he was very appreciative of one of the projects of our Synod, Project Barnabas, that enables chaplains returning from deployment to have a decompressing time while his congregation remains covered by another pastor filling in.

This need to be sensitive to whatever seems to be a disaster to the person suffering it is very real. We certainly realize that there are crises that might objectively be measured as huge, and others we wouldn’t call crises at all. But we remember what Jesus says about the smallest things, like a cup of water given because someone is His disciple (Matt. 10:42). You see, Jesus cares about a person who’s parched with thirst. To Jesus, that’s a really big deal. So as we care for those who are facing small disasters, it’s important that we not forget that it *is* a real disaster, if they see it as such.

### **5. Don’t promise what God doesn’t promise.**

A number of years ago, there were two tragic events within a couple months of each other: Payne Stewart, a professional golfer here in the United States and a Christian who had been wonderfully outspoken in his Christian faith, died while piloting a private plane. He was all alone in the sky, and for whatever reason, he crashed and was killed. Not long after, a player in the National Football League was involved in a car accident. This man also professed to be an evangelical Christian. (I won’t give his name, because this might make him sound as if he isn’t sincere.) He claimed as he was heading off the road toward a tree, he just threw up his hands — took them off the steering wheel — and said, “Jesus, take over!” He survived with just a few scratches. Later, this football

player was speaking about the experience — and this may have been intended to be a testimony to the trust we can have in the Lord — he said God had saved him because he was a Christian. A reporter then asked him, “What about Payne Stewart? He was a Christian, too, and he died in his plane crash.” The football player said, “Well, if he had just turned it over to the Lord, he wouldn’t have.” The reporter asked, “Do you know that he didn’t turn it over to the Lord?” And the player said, “I bet he didn’t, because he died.”

This football player, I’m sure well-meaning, was saying that if you’re trusting in the Lord, everything is going to be fine. If you’re trusting in the Lord, no automobile accident, no plane crash will hurt you. Hurricanes won’t get you. Earthquakes won’t get you. That’s trying to promise something that God definitely does not promise. And there are countless ways this is described in Scripture, including the promise Jesus does make to His disciples that you’re going to bear crosses and that some of those things are going to be pretty big disasters. There’s also the example in Habakkuk, one of the suffering passages that is kind of intriguing. You do have the situation there where God’s people are going to suffer, and we know in this case as well that God’s people stand under condemnation; that’s a problem in Judah already. But then Habakkuk raises the concern that “While it’s true our people here — your people, Lord — are sinning, the fact is that the Chaldeans are worse. So how come they’re going to get the upper hand and innocent people among the people of Judah are going to die?” We don’t know why, but it is true that many of God’s faithful people also died when the Chaldeans destroyed Jerusalem. God doesn’t promise that His people will never suffer. Don’t promise what God doesn’t promise. That’s the “prosperity gospel,” and it’s misleading.

### **6. But don’t settle for proclaiming less than God promises.**

Now, God promises that by faith in Christ Jesus we’re going to be in heaven. You’re going to get to go to heaven. It’s impossible to imagine a greater promise. And without question that is the promise that is the answer for believers in Christ who we know have perished in a disaster, loved ones who we know are believers in Christ and have now died. There’s the ultimate answer: they get to go to heaven. But the fact is we don’t need to proclaim the Gospel to believers in Christ who have died. They don’t need it anymore. We are called to proclaim the comfort

of the Gospel to those who are grieving, mourning over lost ones, wondering what the next steps in life for them will be. Whether it's a congregation in Pilger, Neb., that doesn't have a church building now; whether it's a family in New Orleans who doesn't have a home now; whether it's someone who's lost his or her job; or whatever the particular loss may be, those are the people we're addressing. And while "you get to go to heaven by faith in Christ" is the greatest promise that we get to apply again and again and one that always, always has relevance, because the ultimate future does impact our present, this isn't the only thing God promises. Don't promise less than God promises. Be bold to proclaim every promise that God gives. And some of them go beyond "you get to go to heaven someday."

### Gospel for the preacher to proclaim

All that Law we've been given is for us as preachers or as people who are sharing God's Word privately with their friends in crisis situations — those who are the speakers. Those are the "don'ts" — serious cautions to consider. But there's also Gospel for us to speak, Gospel that people are comforted to hear when we proclaim it even in the most difficult times of suffering, which brings us to our very important "do's."

In order to be Gospel — and this is crucial — what we say has to be one particular thing. At times of suffering, times of crisis, disasters, when it is really difficult to know what to say, a lot of things are said and spoken that may not be Gospel. They may be helpful, practical, sympathetic and gentle and, therefore, have value. But we're talking about sharing the Gospel in times of suffering. And Gospel is more than just a nice touch on the hand. It's more than just figuring out how we're going to rebuild the town that's been destroyed by a tornado. Gospel is something a lot more specific than that.


St. Paul gives us some very helpful counsel on what that is. In fact, Paul is really very clear on what we say any time we seek to proclaim. **"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).** That's an amazing thing for him to be saying. Paul had spent a year-and-a-half in Corinth, a very lengthy stop, one of the longest of his whole missionary experience, and all that time he was there, he really only talked about one thing: Jesus Christ and Him crucified. In the book of 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses such diverse issues as meat sacrifices, adultery, misunderstandings of the resurrection, schisms and so many others. Yet Paul

says here at the beginning of the book that it's all Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It's all the cross of Christ.

We've got no problem with that when we're telling people they get to go to heaven someday, because there's no other way to heaven except by what Jesus did on the cross. The challenge is that many times in facing a disaster we're really addressing needs that could be understood as First Article needs. New Orleans has been devastated by a hurricane, and your house and business are gone. Your church and your home in Pilger, Neb., have been leveled by a tornado. Where do we go from here? You've lost a loved one to death in a disaster, and you're comforted that *she* is in heaven, but what do I do now in life? What's tomorrow going to be all about here in *my* life, here on earth? This includes those smaller "disasters" that Pastor Nuckols initially dismissed, too, doesn't it? It involves members who lost their jobs, members whose son is having trouble in school, so many of those kinds of situations. Those, too, are needs that we call First Article needs.

God's care and access to His throne of grace — we always have that, and it isn't just God caring for us when we die so that we get to go to heaven as did a loved one who died. God's care is when you don't have any idea how you're going to provide clothing and shoes, meat and drink, to your kids when your severance package is used up. Access to the throne of grace isn't just "Let me in! Let me in! Let me in to heaven!" when I die. It's "Lord, I'm at the end of my rope for sure, and I have no earthly idea how this is going to work out. But You've invited me to bring this before you, and You've promised to hear. And You will hear because of Jesus' death on the cross," because of nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

That's all there is; that's all we preach. But think of all that that means! And so you see, the *Deus absconditus* (hidden will of God) isn't really a matter of "Will God take care of me?" or "You know why God didn't take care of me." There is much we don't know. In what ways is what's happening now God taking perfect care of me? I don't know; that's hidden from me. Or, This care that God's taking of me now ... how is this good? I don't know; that's hidden. But that's a different set of questions altogether. It's a different set of questions for which we won't get the answers this side of heaven. But in each of those questions, unlike the others, in each of those questions, what is intact is God caring for us in the very best way because Jesus Christ and His death on the cross have reconciled us to God.



In our discussion with the Roman Catholic parish priest in India, we did ask him, “More than a month after the tsunami, when you did address it in a sermon, what did you say?” He said, “Fear not. I am with you.” It might have taken a month to say the words, but he couldn’t have done better. “I am with you:” this is the peace with God in reconciliation. This is the shalom, the total condition of well-being that comes when sin has been removed by Jesus’ death on the cross. Many things we might say are anything but comforting, but the cross of Christ fully understood with all its ramifications always gives us a word of comfort to share.

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