

Dealing with Disaster

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Preacher: Dr. Ralph Carter

[0 : 00] This morning, I want to begin a series, another series, this time about choices. And I want to preface it by saying just a few things.

This series is going to probably last about five messages. I don't know all exactly right now, but I think probably I'll do about five messages along this line. But these first two messages are dealing with a particular aspect of our choices, and that is how do we deal with disaster when disaster strikes in our lives?

I want to preface the message. If you'll give me about two minutes, I want to preface it, and then we'll jump right into the message. But I believe, to kind of tell you my philosophy on life, I believe that primarily life is a series of choices that we make, that we get the life we bargain for.

Now, there are some things that are out of our control. I can't control where I'm born, to whom I'm born, when I'm born, any of those kind of things. I can't control how smart I am. I can't control a whole lot about my life.

But most of the things, day to day to day to day, God gives us the freedom to make choices, and those choices are reflected, I believe, much of the time, most of the time, in the way I live my life.

[1 : 16] If I have a good life, it's because I've made some good choices. If I have a life that's just filled with turmoil, not always is it the case, because sometimes I said things are unavoidable, but oftentimes the turmoil I experience in life is my own doing.

We all understand that, right? We know that there's a penalty that comes with sin, and even in my own personal choices, that sometimes there are consequences of my actions that impact my life. So choices are really, really important.

So the next five weeks, we're thinking about choices. This morning, we're thinking about choices regarding disaster that arises in our life. Now, some of you are thinking, well, Pastor, you can't avoid disaster, and you're exactly right, you can't.

But you can choose how you respond to the disaster that comes your way in life. And some people would even argue that point. They'd say, no, certain things happen, they're unavoidable, and so you just have to kind of go with the flow and let the disaster take you wherever it will.

I'm telling you, that's erroneous thinking. In fact, if you want to make wise choices and good choices in a time where the world you're living in is falling apart around you, I think there are two things that are very, very necessary.

[2 : 26] One, you have to condition yourself prior to the hardship to prepare yourself for when that hardship comes. There are some mental pictures you need to get in your mind, and I've got to say to you today, a lot of believers, they understand what I'm going to say in these five points.

They understand intellectually they would nod their head in agreement, but they don't live in the reality of those five points. Oftentimes, we're more optimistic than we should be about certain things.

I know it kind of sounds mysterious to you, but you'll see it as the message unfolds this morning. So let's just look at these different things in just a moment.

Before we do that, though, I want you to understand that life can become very, very difficult and hard. We all can suffer disasters in our life. In fact, we all, if you live long enough, will experience some disasters, some setbacks, some real dire difficulties in your life.

Let me tell you some forms they can take. First of all, there can be a death in our family. Boy, that always shakes us up, right? When we have someone in our family that dies or one of our close friends dies.

[3 : 40] I lost an aunt just two days ago. I'm going to Seneca right after this service today to be with the family over there. And yet, it was one of those things. She died of Alzheimer's.

We have been praying that God would soon take her. So it's not such a setback when that's a circumstance, right? You've all known those kind of situations. But sometimes, it's a real tragedy. When you're in the middle of a good night's rest and the highway patrol knocks at your door and they tell you that loved one has died in a car wreck. Boy, that's devastating, isn't it? It just sucks the life right out of us.

Or they're involved in some freak accident that we couldn't foresee. Or they suddenly get cancer and we didn't see it coming. Or they have a heart attack and they die in the moment. That takes us by surprise and that's difficult to deal with.

There is financial disaster that sometimes strikes us, right? Some of you, two years ago, were doing very, very well financially. But you would admit this morning, some of you, not all of you, some of you, it's been a good time the last two years.

[4 : 43] But for some of you, the last two years has been a real struggle. I know in Greenville, there are just any number of people who own restaurants who have closed their doors.

They can't find help. They can't keep the restaurant open. They weren't able to have supplies delivered to them in time. And many of them have just thrown in the towel, so to speak. They've said, we can't make a living doing this.

And so life can be uncertain economically. Life can also be uncertain in terms of our health, right?

You can be on top of your game, so to speak, eating right, exercising, doing all the right things.

Go to the doctor. He does a blood test and calls you in three days and says, you know what? We've got a problem. You need to come in here and let's do some additional tests. And you find out subsequent to that, I have cancer or my loved one has cancer and we're having to go through radiation.

We're having to go through chemotherapy. There's some surgery involved. Boy, that just throws our life in disarray. How do you deal with life when those kind of things come? There are other problems that can come.

[5 : 47] Solid families. I mean solid families. You think would go the distance. They can just sometimes unexpectedly fall apart. And children are often hurt when those marriages come apart at the seams.

When a husband comes home and announces to his wife, I found someone else and I no longer love you and I want out of this marriage. Or a wife does that to a husband. A husband.

Suicide can wreak havoc in a family's life. A business is closed and people are laid off jobs and fired. And on and on and on we could go.

We don't like to think about those things. Those are negative things. But the truth of the matter is, every one of us in this room have probably already experienced one or more of those kind of situations.

Here's the big question. Here's what we're looking at for the next two weeks. How do we respond when that happens? How can we respond? Well, first of all, we can get angry.

[6 : 50] Have you ever seen anybody that got really angry over any or all those situations I previously met? I've seen lots of folks. They get so angry they could just bite nails. I've seen them just clench their fist in anger.

I've seen the veins in their neck protrude when they begin to talk about it. They're just so angry it just destroys them with anger. I've seen other folk who become, over a period of time, not so angry as they become bitter.

They get over that initial crisis, but it just leaves a bad taste in their mouth. And as Hebrew says, a root of bitterness springs up in their life, and they come to the place that they're not angry over anything in particular.

They're just bitter toward lie. Have you ever seen folk like that? Just day to day to day, they just live their life with a sense of bitterness. It's often because of hardship that has occurred at some point in their life.

Some people, unfortunately, I see this pretty often, they're active in the church. They love God. They proclaim. They love God. Something tragic happens in their life, something that creates a real hardship in their life, and they just withdraw from God.

[8 : 00] They just walk away from God. They say, I'm not going to church anymore. I'm not reading my Bible anymore. I'm not praying anymore. If this is how God treats me after how I have tried to be obedient to Him, then I'm just out of here.

And they absolutely withdraw from God. Now, here's a surprising thing, too, maybe for some of you. Sometimes when hardship comes, people respond in exactly the opposite fashion, and they draw closer to God in times of crisis than they've ever been.

They rightfully recognize that He's in control, and they need to be dependent upon Him, and they actually draw closer. That's another way that we can respond to heartache and to crisis.

Some people fall into depression. You've seen folk who just withdraw, and they stay home. They stop being social. They stop going out. They close the curtains.

They sometimes come on the television and watch it just incessantly. Sometimes they just have nothing to do with anybody. Their whole world goes dark. Some people surrender, wither, and die.

[9 : 03] Believe it or not, believe it or not, every one of those responses are reflective of choices that we make.

Are you listening? Every one of those different responses I talked about is a choice that somebody makes. The truth of the matter is most folk don't see that.

Most folk think, I just responded just naturally. I didn't have a choice in the matter, but I want to tell you something. You always have a choice about how you respond to what life deals you over the course of time.

And if you make wise ride choices, you'll weather that storm better than if you don't. So this morning, I want to give you a few tips about how do you deal with disaster when it comes knocking at your door.

And I take no delight in saying this to you this morning. I don't want to depress anyone here, but I'm going to tell you something. It's going to come knocking at your door before you get out of this world.

[10 : 09] You understand that? No one is immune to it. And that's one of the problems. The first part of this message is going to deal with that, son. A lot of times believers live as though they're immune to heartache and hardship and disaster.

And they create for themselves a mentality that doesn't prepare them well for when disaster does strike. Because they live in this world with rose-colored glasses thinking, If I love God and I go to church and I do right, then all that will be avoidable in my life.

And I'm here to tell you this morning, heartache, believers, I don't care how much you pray, how much you love God, how much you read the Word of God, how faithful you are in church, how much you give to wonderful charitable causes, you are not immune to heartache and hardship in life.

And it will sooner or later come knocking at your door. So how are you going to respond when it does come? I think two things have to happen. One, you have to be mentally prepared. And secondly, you have to take some right actions.

Next week, if you'll come back, I'm going to tell you what those right actions are. Today, we're going to think on the mental part. How do I prepare myself mentally for hardship that could be lying at my door?

[11 : 22] Five things you need to come to grips with. First of all, life isn't fair. Would you write that down if you're taking notes this morning? You say, well, Pastor, I already know that.

Or some of you would even argue the point and say, no, I think life is fair. Because you see, God is just. And therefore, if God is just and God is in control, everything that happens in life is fair. I want to tell you something. You need to pull your head out of the ground.

Because life is not fair. We oftentimes, as Americans, want to believe that everything is equitable and everything is just and everything is fair. And it's even Stephen.

And that should be our goal, to treat people equitably all the time. But I want to tell you something. It doesn't typically play out that way. Life just isn't fair.

The Bible declares that God is just again and again and again. But as we like to think about fairness, the Bible never says that God is fair.

[12 : 21] The Bible never declares, I'm going to treat every man the same. The Bible says exactly the opposite. Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated.

You understand that? So God doesn't even treat all of us on an equal basis. God demonstrates favor and grace to whom he demonstrates favor and grace.

But life just isn't fair. And I want to tell you why. It's not because of anything God's done. It's because of what we have done to ourselves. Adam and Eve sinned against God in the garden.

And immediately, if you can picture this, our world became broken. And all their children who were ever born after them were born with a bent toward sin. And the evidence is that we are all sinners. We have all fallen in their path. And as a result of that, our world is broken. It is marred. It is unjust. And it just flat isn't fair.

[13 : 26] Now let me give you some biblical evidence of that. And also some experiential evidence that you'll quickly see if you desire to. First of all, here's biblical evidence. Jesus lived a perfect life.

Amen. That's yes and no. He lived a perfect life. Amen. He would not have been subject to die on the cross if the world were fair, if life was fair.

That was totally unfair. It was the plan of God, but it was totally unfair that Jesus should have to die for us. But they put him to death. John the Baptist was the one that Jesus said was the best man ever born of woman.

John the Baptist was beheaded because he preached the truth to Herod. If the world were just, if the world were always fair, that would never have happened.

Remember Joseph? Joseph in the Old Testament is sold into slavery by his brothers. In a just world, that would never happen. In a world where things were fair and equitable, that would never have happened.

[14 : 34] He's sold after he's taken into slavery to a man by the name of Potiphar, a wealthy guy. His wife is a piece of work. She sets her sights on Joseph and desires to sleep with Joseph.

And Joseph does absolutely the right thing. He flees from her. Remember? Leaves his coat in her hand. What does she do? She cries rape. You know what the end result of that story is?

He's thrown in prison. In a just world, in a fair world, that doesn't happen. Do you understand that? You see those commercials shot by St. Jude's Hospital, Shriners Hospital?

My wife and I give to some of those ministries. I tell you, every time I see them, they break my heart. Because I want to tell you something. It isn't fair. It shouldn't be that my little boy and girl can run and play, and somebody else's little girl and boy is confined to a wheelchair, that they're born without arms and without legs, that parents have to sit with their children as they watch them suffer and even die with cancer.

It's not fair. It's just not fair. But I'm going to tell you something. In this world, it's always going to be that way. In the world to come, it will be fair.

[15 : 52] But in this world, life just isn't fair. Now, you say, well, Pastor, why do you believe me? It's because that's kind of depressing. I'm going to tell you something. If you don't live with that mentality when hardship comes to your door, you're going to be tempted to get angry with God and say, wait a second, this isn't fair.

You ever heard a believer say that? Why is this happening to me? I mean, I love God. I pray. I do right. This just isn't right. I'm telling you, life isn't right.

You've got to accept that. If you're going to deal with disaster in the way that God would have us to deal with disaster, you've got to keep in mind all the time, life isn't fair. I'm not going to expect it to treat me fair. I hope it will.

I'm going to treat others fair. But I will understand that life just isn't always fair. Everybody got that? Let me tell you a second thing. Life is also uncertain and fragile.

Now, we know that as believers because the Bible tells us that any number of places. But I want to tell you something. We dupe ourselves into believing. And this is the, I think, a problem brought on sometimes by even Christian preachers, prosperity preachers, who give us this notion, if you love God and you'll tithe and you'll do right, you can expect the Wells Fargo truck to pull up any day.

[17 : 10] That things are just always going to go smoothly for you. That if you get sick, you're just praying God's going to heal you. And I'm going to tell you something. Life is fragile.

And it is absolutely uncertain. Listen to what James says in James 4, 13 and 14. Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit.

You don't even know what tomorrow will bring, what your life will be. Here's why. For you are a bit of smoke, get this, that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.

How many of you can remember going to work? You pull up at this red light. It catches you almost every time you start to work. It's the middle of winter, February.

It's about 25, 30 degrees outside. The exhaust from that car in front of you is just boiling up so fast, you can't see the car hardly. But just as quickly as you notice it, what happens?

[18:17] It just disappears. And you sit there a second longer and the engine keeps running and it produces more vapor. And just like the other vapor, it disappears.

And you sit there another second and it does it again and again until the traffic light changes and you take off. Can I tell you that's how it is in life? One generation comes and lives and they look so much in control and they're the story.

And guess what? As soon as you think they're the story, they vanish and they're gone. And their children fall in suit and their children fall in suit and their children fall in suit.

And five generations later, no one hardly even knows anyone in that first generation ever lived. Isn't that so? Now, again, I don't mean to be depressing, but I'm going to tell you something.

It'll help you to deal with difficulties when they arise in your life if you can understand. This life is uncertain. It's fragile. Don't confuse yourself.

[19:15] Don't tempt yourself into believing. Don't tempt yourself into believing. Boy, you are good to go. Because you're just not. It is fragile. You don't need to go around, oh my goodness, we're going to die.

We're all going to die. But you do need to live in the reality of the fact life is fragile. Because you have it today doesn't mean you'll have it tomorrow. Because we're here today doesn't mean we're here tomorrow.

You know, we can't even ensure that every one of us in this room will still be living this time next week. Not a one of us in this room can ensure that. Because life is uncertain.

It is fragile. You can even think you're on top of your game. Let me just give you one illustration for the sake of time. I'll press on. Remember Uzzah in the Old Testament? How many of you remember that name?

U-Z-Z-A-H. See, a number of you. Uzzah was a man in David's army. David is going to recapture the Ark of the Covenant.

[20:09] He's going to bring it to Jerusalem again. It's a red-letter day for King David. He is pumped. Uzzah thinks he's won the lottery. I know you probably never thought about it like this.

But you know why? He's the guy who gets to stand nearest the Ark of the Covenant. I mean, how cool is that, right? They're going to get it and bring it home. And he's the one chosen to walk right there beside the Ark of the Covenant.

And so they're heading toward Jerusalem. It's a happy time. He's so fortunate. He can tell his friends the next day, I was the guy up there nearest the Ark of the Covenant. But guess what? An oxen stumbles.

The cart shifts. The Ark of the Covenant looks like it's about to fall. And he reaches out thinking he's doing a good thing. And he touches it. And when he does, the Levitical law, if he had read it, which he hadn't, had said you're never to do that.

It had special instructions about how it was to be maneuvered and carried and who could, and he wasn't one of those. So when he touches it because of the holiness of God, he struck immediately dead.

[21:14] What looked like a red-letter day became the worst day of his life. And I'm going to tell you something. There are a lot of folk out there that happens in their lives day after day after day where it looks like, man, I'm on top of my game.

Everything's going great. And out of nowhere, life is so cruel and life is so hard. Third thing I want you to see that you need to keep in mind, life on this earth is going to end.

Again, hang with me. It's not all going to be bad news. But I want to promise you, it sounds a little bit depressing, but it's true. Life on this earth is going to end.

We aren't going to make it out alive. Hebrews 9.27 says this, And I want to tell you something.

You can't argue with the stats. Since Adam, for every one man who has ever been born, guess how many have died? One. Every last one.

[22:23] We keep seeing advances in medicine. And I'm fearful that many of us think, well, you know what? We may come to a place where we'll live forever. Never going to happen. Not in this life.

God told Adam and Eve, the soul that sins shall surely die and that curse is on us and we're going to die. There was a Harvard demographer that just a few weeks ago issued a statement.

You know what he said? He said, if you wiped away all cancer, if we could eradicate every form of cancer, and that's the thing we fear probably as much as anything on earth, right?

If you could eradicate every form of cancer, you know how long he projects man would increase in his lifespan? 2.2 years.

Then if you took cancer off the table altogether, the average lifespan would still only be 2.2 years longer than it is at the present. I'm telling you, you can eat right, you can exercise, you can do everything you know to do, but if you've got it in mind, I'm going to avoid death because I'm going to be so healthy, or I'm going to be so godly, or I'm going to be so spiritual, you better think again because it's not going to happen.

[23 : 42] You can't get out of this life alive. Fifthly, or fourthly, only God knows the length of our days. Look, if you will, at Psalm 139 and verse 16.

In Psalm 139 verse 16, David writes these words, Your eyes saw me when I was formless. All my days were written in your book and plan before a single one of them began.

Job 14.5 says, Man's days are determined. The number of his months depends on you, God. I'm telling you, you can live as healthy as you want to, do everything in your power.

You cannot extend your life beyond that which God desires for you to live. Now listen to me carefully. In the book of Isaiah chapter 38, there's a man by the name of Hezekiah.

He's king. He develops what appears to be, in his mind, a relatively small health issue. But he doesn't get better. Isaiah receives a message from God.

[24 : 51] Isaiah is told, Go to the palace and tell Hezekiah he's not going to get well. Isaiah goes to the palace. He sees King Hezekiah. He says, Hezekiah, I got some bad news for you.

You've been a good king. But God says, This illness you've got is going to take your life. You're going to die. Hezekiah is distraught. He does probably what most every one of us in this room would do under those kind of circumstances in our life or in the lives of somebody we love.

You know what he does? He falls face down. He doesn't even wait until Isaiah gets out of the palace. He falls down. He says, God, please, God, I've been a good man. I've tried to do the right thing. I'm not perfect, but I've tried to do the best I can do.

Would you please heal me of this? Would you please extend my life 15 years? Before Isaiah can get out of the palace, God speaks to him and says, Go back. I've changed my mind.

And Isaiah turns around and goes back to Hezekiah, and he comes to Hezekiah, and he says, Hezekiah, I've got news for you. God has heard your prayer. He's going to extend your life 15 years.

[25 : 52] Can I tell you something? God did just that. But get this. 16 years later, he died. Now, I want you to know there are people in your life and in my life, in fact, one of my dear friends, Bill Abels, passed away this past Tuesday.

I've been praying for Bill for four years, every morning, every night, sometimes in the middle of the day. Pray for he and his wife, Bill and Joyce, Abels. Love him to death.

Got another friend with cancer. Same way, every morning, every night, I call his name. There are a host of folk like that. And my wife and I know are good personal friends. But I'm going to tell you something.

Some of them live. Some of them die. But even though that we pray for folk and God extends their life, they're all going to die sooner or later. You know that, right?

You've seen that happen. You just know that. Because we can't get out of this life alive and we can't control the days in which we're going to live. So you say, well, preacher, I'm about as depressed as I've ever been, right?

[27 : 02] I thought you were going to tell me how to deal with disaster. I'm going to. You ready? Here's the final and fifth point in this message. You need to know all those things if you're going to deal effectively with disaster.

But there's one final thing that needs to top the charts that needs to be at the center of your thing above everything else. Here's what it is. God is sovereign and in control, period.

End of story. I want you to repeat that with me, would you? God is sovereign and in control, period. God is sovereign and in control, period. Now, don't take my word for it. Listen to what God's word says. Listen as I read this. I think they're going to put it on the screen for you.

Yours, yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor. Kind of like one of those songs we sang this morning.

[28 : 04] For everything in heaven and earth is yours. It all belongs to you. Listen to this.

Yours, Lord, is the kingdom. You are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor comes from you. You are the ruler of all things.

In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. 1 Chronicles 29, 11, and 12. Listen to this verse in Psalm 135, 6. This is the one I really like. It's so simple. My simple little mind can get it. The Lord does whatever he pleases. Did you hear that?

The Lord does whatever he pleases in the heavens and on the earth and in the seas and all their depths. He just does what he pleases.

[29 : 05] He's not bound by gravity. He's not bound by time. You and I are finite. There are so many things we cannot do. Even if we want to do it, we cannot do them.

He's not bound by absolute. He does whatever he wants. Now, I hear people say, the president of that nation, the king of that nation, the queen of that nation, they are sovereign.

Eh, to an extent. In a small way with a small S, they're sovereign. They control that nation so long as God lets them breathe. But I'm going to tell you something.

There is only one sovereign. You got that? And the only one who is really sovereign is God. So knowing that my life is going to run out and knowing that I'm subject to all these disasters and knowing that life is fragile, how do I keep from wringing my hands?

Because of that fifth truth. I'm not going to deceive myself. I'm going to tell myself, here's the real world I live in. Boy, it's a tough world. There's hardship coming. I know it's going to come. I don't have to guess it's going to come.

[30 : 10] It's going to come. I know life is fragile. I know it's uncertain. I know it's short. I know it's like a vapor appears for a little while and vanishes away. I know I can't do anything to extend my life. But I do know this.

He is in control. Not the world, not anybody else. God and God alone is calling the shots. He's in absolute control. And you say, well, how does that bring you comfort?

Here's how it brings me comfort. Ready? Here are the hands of God, figuratively speaking. I'm in those hands. I'm in those hands.

I'm his. I know that. He's promising. I'm his. I'm his adopted son. Nothing can penetrate those fingers that God does not allow.

And there's great, great, great comfort in that. Am I scared of Alzheimer's and cancer? Yeah. They scare me a little bit. They scare me a lot sometimes. But not when I get thinking that he is in control.

[31 : 08] And if it happens, and it may, he's still got it. He's still in control. He's not going to lose. It surprises me all the time.

It never surprises him. Isn't that amazing? He's never caught off guard. He says, oh, that happened. He's never had that experience. I have it all the time. He's never had it. He's always, always in control.

That's a real comfort. And you can deal with disaster when you know he's got this. I don't have to deceive myself. I don't have to tell myself, I'm going to live forever. Nothing bad ever going to happen in my life.

Yeah, it is. But he's still got it. He's in control. That's about a good prayer. Father, encourage these believers here today.

Help them to live in the reality of truth where we know this is not our final destination. We can't live healthy enough that we're going to make it through.

[32 : 05] And we are going to lose some people we love and are dear to us along the way. And there's going to be ups and downs in our finances and ups and downs in our relationships with people.

But God, you're the one thing that's always constant. You're faithful and you're good and you're sovereign and you're strong. And today, I pray collectively, we would put ourselves in your hands and see ourselves, picture ourselves, whenever anything comes our way in life, as being in your hands.

And nothing can penetrate those fingers that you don't allow. So we're good with that. We make this prayer in your powerful and precious name.

Amen.