

Biblical Perspectives on the Space Shuttle Challenger

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God, in a very sobering, dramatic, and captivating manner, has drawn the attention of our nation and much of the world to just how fragile and uncertain life is. He did this by the events clustered around the launch and then the sudden destruction of the space shuttle Challenger this past Tuesday morning. Now while we seldom allow current events of any nature to dictate the subject matter of our pulpit ministry in this assembly, but rather, are committed to consecutive, expository ministry of the Word of God, there have been over the history of our almost 20 years as a church a few occasions when events of such magnitude either within the church or within the world have so captured our minds and our spirits as to demand that the teaching of the Word of God respecting those issues be brought to bear upon them in the assembly of God's people. Now the precedent for doing this is clearly set by our Lord Himself who, according to Luke 13, took as an occasion to underscore some vital Biblical truths two shocking current events in His day. We read in Luke 13:1:

"Now there were some present at that very season who told Him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." We know nothing for certain about this incident, but apparently, there was an incident involving some Galilaeans who were either as imposters or perhaps as innocent worshippers who had some political alliances that were threatening to Pilate were nonetheless in the midst of offering up sacrifices in a place of worship brutally slain so that their own life's blood was mingled with the blood of the sacrifices that were offered. It was the tragic, sudden, brutal death of some Galilaeans. And then we read in verses 2 and 3 that Jesus said, "Do you think that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they have suffered these things? I tell you, No: but, except you repent, you shall all in like manner perish." Then He takes a second current event or a recent event in which there was the tragic death of 18 people crushed to death when a tower in Siloam fell upon them. Here was an event that caused a thrill of shock to go through Jerusalem. When people heard that a tower fell upon 18 so-called innocent victims, and they were snuffed out in a moment of time. Here our Lord takes a second current event that captured the attention of men and women and used it as the occasion to bring to bear upon the living some vital principles of the moral government of Almighty God. And so I have no reservations concerning the question as to whether or not what I am doing has Biblical precedent. The precedent is set by our Lord Himself. And so this morning I propose to address you on the subject, some Biblical perspectives on the tragedy of the destruction of the space shuttle Challenger. And you will hear things this morning that were never once suggested by the network anchormen, things that Peter Jennings never said, Tom Brokaw never uttered, and surely Dan Rather would never speak, and I doubt would even think. You will hear things that Larry Speaks did not say from the White House. And I'm confident that some of you will hear many things that will strike a deep

"amen" within your breast. But I'm equally confident that some of you may hear things that will deeply offend you. But frankly, I do not care if I please or offend so long as I am true to the Word of the Living God.

And as I take up this subject of some Biblical perspectives on this tragic incident, you must understand with me that everything I attempt to bring forth from the Word of God under four major headings assumes this Biblical framework comprised of two basic axioms or spiritual laws. The first one is this: all that happens in God's universe, including this event, is decreed and executed by God's sovereign will. If the Bible makes anything plain, it makes plain that everything that transpires in human history, at any point in history, at any circumstance in history happens because God decreed it and sovereignly executed it. And I quickly give you four text which make this abundantly clear. In Ephesians 1:11, we read that God is the God who works all things after the counsel of His own will--all things. Was this event a thing, or was this event comprised of many things--people and rocket engines and fuel tanks? Yes. Well, He works all things after the counsel of His own will. In Psalm 115:3, we read: "Our God is in the heavens: He has done whatsoever He pleased." Because He is in the heavens, enthroned above all things, He does according to His own will in every realm. And Daniel 4:35 is another classic statement of this: "All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; and He does according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What are you doing?" What God wills in His heart and in His decree He executes by His hand, and He never drops a stitch between His decree and the execution of that decree in sovereign power. Therefore, Paul can say at the end of that amazing treatment of the sovereignty of God in the disposition of nations with reference to the salvation of individuals, "For of Him, and through Him, and unto Him, are all things. To Him be the glory for ever. Amen" (Romans 11:36). Of Him in sovereign decree in sovereign decree, through Him by powerful specific providence, and unto Him, that is, ultimately to the accomplishment of His purpose and the securing of His praise are all things, including the sickening ball of light and the flash of fire and the disintegration of the space shuttle and its inhabitants. Now if the Bible teaches anything, it teaches that truth. All that happens in God's universe, including this event is decreed and executed by His sovereign will.

And then the second thing that it teaches that forms the framework of the four perspectives I want to bring before you is this: only God fully knows with infallible certainty and exhaustive understanding His purposes in His works, including this event. Why did God decree and execute this particular event? Well, only God can with infallible certainty and exhaustive understanding answer that question because it is an infinite God with the entire plan of eternity before His mind, exercising infinite wisdom in conjunction with infinite justice and infinite love and infinite mercy. And all of His attributes and every single thread in the fabric of His purpose, in a sense, is imbedded in eternity past and stretches into the eternity to come. And therefore, only the infinite mind of God can fully know the significance of any one thread in that fabric. This is why we read in both the Old and the New Testaments statements such as these: Isaiah 55:8-9: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, says Jehovah. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." This is why Paul, having contemplated the sovereignty of God in the disposition of nations as that disposition impinged upon the salvation of individual men, could say in Romans 11:33-34, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past tracing out! For who has

known the mind of the Lord? or who has been His counsellor?" Who sits God down and teaches Him what is right and good and wise and just? No one does. Only an infinite mind can understand the workings of an infinite mind. And so in that sense, God alone can encompass His own mind in all of His doings. And when any creature rears back on his hind legs and, as it were, demands as a little worm of the dust that God make an accounting of His ways to man the creature, do you know how God responds to that? Now it's Romans 9:20-21: "Nay but, O man, who are you that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why did you make me thus?" In other words, Paul says the very fact that a creature would dare to even rear back in carnal impudence and ask questions, as though God were accountable to man the creature, is the height of impudence and blasphemy. "Nay but, O man, who are you the creature to call God, the mighty creator, to account to you. And so as I seek to lay before you some Biblical perspectives concerning this event, I am not taking the place of God. Only God knows with infallible certainty and exhaustive understanding all that He purposed in this even. But because I cannot speak with infallible certainty and exhaustive understanding with reference to all that He purposes does not mean that I cannot bring this event under the scrutiny of that which is revealed. And having done so, preach it to you as "Thus saith the Lord," for the Scripture says the things that are hidden belong unto the Lord. "The secret things belong unto Jehovah our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children...." Now with those two fundamental principles or axioms from Scripture acting as a bit and bridle to keep us from straying off either into arrogance or ignorant despair, what can we learn, what ought we to learn from this tragic event in the light of the Word of God? What may God be saying to us as individuals, as a church, as a nation, as a world?

This is the first thing God is reminding us of: man does not, man cannot, nor will he ever be able to control his own destiny. Very simple, isn't it? Now from the moment of the fall when man attempted to take things into his own hands and play God, he has always been seeking to control his own destiny, to be the master of his own fate and the captain of his own soul. They said in the days of the tower of Babel, "Let us make us a tower that will reach up to the heavens." God's purpose was to replenish and fill and scatter over the face of the earth. And man says, "No, we will be the masters of our own fate, the captains of our own souls." And God came and confused them and confounded them and caused them to speak in different languages that forced them into fragmented groups that they might fulfill His purpose. The Scriptures tell us again and again man does not, man cannot, nor will he ever be able to control his own destiny.

Turn to the book of Proverbs with me for several clear statements of this truth. Proverbs 16:9: "A man's heart devises his way...." That is, men makes their plans, and they ought to; they are responsible to. It is part of their privilege and responsibility as image-bearers of God to be reflective, thoughtful, planning people, not living off the end of our noses, but living by principle and plan, and wisely thought out purpose. That's not an indictment about man devising his way. That's a description of how man ought to function. "A man's heart devises his way; but Jehovah directs his steps." All of man's planning cannot negate the sovereign power of God to turn his steps in a way utterly and totally different from the path that a man's heart devises. Proverbs 20:24: "A man's goings are of Jehovah; how then can man understand his way?" Jehovah is active in the direction of all of His creatures. How then can a man attempt to perceive the path by which he's come and the path by which he will go on in the future and disregard this most fundamental reality, that a

sovereign God is in control of His destiny. Proverbs 19:21: "There are many devices in a man's heart [many plans, many purposes, the conception of what he ought to do and be, and where he ought to go]; but [regardless of the multiplicity of man's devices] the counsel of Jehovah, that shall stand." There proper devices in the entire NASA community, that that space shuttle should make its way into orbit, perform its experiments, send back its pictures of a classroom in space. Many devices, but God in His counsels from eternity had determined that at the precise moment that fireball exploded, that it should be so. And all of man's devices could not negate the counsel of God. This not only the merely the assertion of the wise man Solomon. This very truth is celebrated in the Psalms. Psalm 33:10-11: "Jehovah brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the thoughts of the peoples to be of no effect. The counsel of Jehovah stands fast for ever, the thoughts of His heart to all generations." What governs the world? What governs whether any given space shuttle shall accomplish its intended mission? The thought of God's heart laid up from eternity called the counsel of the Lord. That's what determines it. I pray you children listen to these verses. You won't have a history course in school that will ever tell you this. You won't have a secular history teacher ever tell you that there's a God in control, and Napoleon became who he was and fell into his destruction in the way that he did because Almighty God is the Lord of history. "No, there are little wrinkles upon the blanket of chance. One thing falls out one way, another way, but if we could have just changed the wrinkles, it would all be different." Isaiah 14:27: "For Jehovah of hosts has purposed, and who shall annul it? and His hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back [like a parent does the hand of a little child that reaches out to touch a forbidden object--grabs the hand and pulls it back]?" O I tell you, honestly, I get goose flesh just reading that text here in the pulpit. When God stretches out His hand to accomplish His sovereign will, is anybody here big enough to put your hand on God's and pull it away? Are there enough computers to devise and conceive a way to pull His hand away. Listen, there could be a billion more computers and a thousand back up systems to every system on every shuttle, but if God has purposed that it shall be a fireball before our eyes, none, none, none, can take God's hand and pull it back. That's what the Bible teaches. Man does not, man cannot, nor will he ever be able to control his own destiny. That's why the exhortation of Scripture is clear. Proverbs 27:1: "Do not boast yourself of tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." Why? Because if the day is likened to a womb of unseen and unknown activities, that which the day gives birth to is not determined by you but by a sovereign God. And what is in the womb of each day is what He decreed from eternity. "Do not boast yourself of tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." This is why James says in chapter 4, "Go to now you that say, 'We'll go into such and such a city and buy and sell and get gain and be so long and have a business enterprise. And built on that, we'll do this, and contingent upon that we'll do this.'" He says, "Wait a minute, you're not in control." He says, "What is your life? For you are a vapor that appears for a little time, and then vanishes away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall both live, and do this or that." And in that saying, he doesn't mean just pick up a little cliché and say, "I'll see you, Lord willing." He means you have a mind set in which you live as one who really believes, "I do not, nor can I, nor will I ever be able to control my own destiny." And I say, my dear friends, we need desperately to hear this message from Scripture. For in our day, the idea is that by technology, by data banks, by computer analysis, by chemical application, by physical forces, we will gain control of everything in God's universe. We will control disease. Cancer will be blotted out in X number of years. We will control age. We will control this; we will control that. And sane sensible men with PhD

degrees are talking about making men live for 100 years, 150, 200 years. And in all of those impudent questions of those arrogant reporters, what lay behind most of those questions? The assumption was, somewhere the reason must be that we lost control of a certain technology. Throw more technology, throw more money, throw more brains; then we'll be in control. We can guarantee totally safe space flights. My friends, not until you can yank God off His throne. Man does not, man cannot, nor will he every be able to control his own destiny. You better learn that. You young people, lay that to heart because that's the truth. You could lock yourself up in a cell three feet thick, reinforced concrete; put there your dried food, canned water, expert ventilating system, something that supposedly could protect you through a direct hit of a hydrogen bomb, and God could make you choke in your sleep over your own spittle. It wouldn't be the first time it happened. You don't control your destiny. And I say, that's the first thing God is saying to us through the tragedy of this past Tuesday.

But then there's a second thing God is saying in this. Man cannot boast with arrogant pride in his achievements without provoking God to humble him. Now there are many examples of this in the Old and the New Testaments. I'm only taking one classic example from the Old and one from the New. Turn to the book of Daniel.

Nebuchadnezzar, king over the vast, impressive empire of Babylon, raised to this place of influence by the sovereign will and power of God, yet he is full of boastful, arrogant pride in regards to what he believes are his achievements. Then God gives him a dream. And in the interpretation of that dream by Daniel, this is what he is told, that God has a purpose; he has something to teach him. Daniel 4:34-37:

"And at the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the Most High, and I praised and honored Him that lives for ever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom from generation to generation; and all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; and He does according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What are You doing? At the same time my understanding returned unto me [he had been like a beast of the field for several years]; and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and brightness returned unto me; and my counsellors and my lords sought unto me; and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent greatness was added unto me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all His works are truth, and His ways justice; and those that walk in pride He is able to abase."

Nebuchadnezzar was strutting like a peacock and preening the feathers of his own self-importance. This is mighty Babylon which my wisdom and my power has built. And God said, "I'll make you like a beast of the field, your body wet with the dew of heaven." That's exactly what God did until his fingernails grew like the talons of an eagle. God made him like an animal until he learned his lesson: "Don't you strut in the presence of Almighty God." The closing note of the lesson he learned is, those who walk in pride, He is able to abase. And He did the same thing with Nebuchadnezzar's successor Belshazzar. You read it in chapter 5. No time to pause, but He did the same thing. He humbled him and struck at the very nerve centers of his pride.

But now in the New Testament, Acts 12, we read the record of a man who was given great ability as a leader and particularly as an orator. He could take words like a handful of diamonds and so hold them and turn them as to dazzle and sparkle and

cause people to sigh and to ooh and to aah at his marvelous ability with words. And in his arrogance and in his pride, he used his ability to bring to himself praise that belonged only to God. And you know what he did? He provoked God to humble him. Acts 12:20:

"Now he was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: and they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was fed from the king's country. And upon a set day Herod arrayed himself in royal apparel [O, he was preening his feathers], and sat on the throne, and made an oration unto them. [He took all of his powers of oratory, and he hurled them with tremendous concentration upon the eyes and the ears of that auditorium.] And the people shouted, saying, The voice of a god, and not of a man. [And at that point, Herod should have risen up on his throne and said, 'No, no, no, the ability to draw breath into my lungs is from the living God. The ability to put one word on top of another to make any meaning; my sanity is a gift from God. The ability to move you with words is a gift of God.' But no, when they said, 'the voice of a god,' one can only see him sitting there sucking in that praise like a dry sponge being plunged into a bucket of water. And God said, 'Enough, enough.'] And immediately an angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost."

Apparently, God did something that it usually takes weeks and months to happen in the grave. For the maggots to multiply and consume the body, God apparently did it right in front of their eyes. Imagine, their god crawling with maggots. Why? He provoked God with his arrogant pride. As carefully as I qualify it, somebody's going to go out and break the 9th commandment and say I said, but God will hold you accountable in the Day of Judgment. He won't hold me accountable. I am not saying that every member of NASA is a Herod-like proud man who, every time a shuttle goes up into orbit, preens his feathers, and when people ooh and aah and pour out their accolades, sucks in the praise to his own heart in an idolatrous way. I am not saying that. I don't know the hearts of the vast NASA team; I don't know the hearts of the astronauts. But what I'm saying is this: the overall impression of the entire NASA program and its successes and of the average American is, "Look what we've done! Look at our accomplishments! Look what our might and brains and skill and technology have accomplished!" There is no jealousy to give glory to God, the God who gives the minds clever enough to penetrate the mysteries of laws of His universe, to make the hardware and software and the computers, to make the various machines and to know the principles of aerodynamics. You don't find even anything that approaches a desire to magnify the God of heaven from whom all these things come. And I'm convinced that what God was saying in that fireball was this: it is enough. "We're gods. It's like taking a trip down the street now. 27 successful launches--we've got it in the bag, man. We've got a hold now. We've got the glitches worked out. We've got such safety measures and backup measures and contingency plans. We've done it!" And I say, man cannot boast with arrogant pride in his achievements without provoking God to humble him. And I believe God humbled us as a nation before the whole world.

But then there's a third thing that comes out of this entire tragedy. Not only do I set before you that God is saying to us man does not, man cannot, nor will he ever be able to control his own destiny; man cannot boast with arrogant pride in his achievements without provoking God to humble him, but now here's the heart of my message this morning: a nation cannot ever flagrantly disregard God's moral law and

not receive His judgments. Proverbs 11:34 says, "Righteousness [that is, regard for the moral law of God] exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." Galatians 6:7: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked [He is not snubbed]: for whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap." Romans 1:18 says the wrath of God is revealed even now. Not only shall be in the Day of Judgment, but the wrath of God is even now "revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hinder the truth in unrighteousness." What is ungodliness and unrighteousness of men? Ungodliness is not being like God. And what is it to be like God? It is to be righteous. What is it to be righteous? It is to live by His law. The wrath of God is revealed against all those who flagrantly disregard His law. And a nation cannot forever flagrantly disregard God's moral law and not receive His judgments. Now I do not assert with the dogmatism with which I have made the first two points. Notice the change in my terminology in these subheadings.

Can it be that there's a relation between the national desecration of the sanctity of Lord's Day and the national humiliation of the Challenger's destruction. Last Lord's Day, January 26, I led in prayer in this pulpit that God would have mercy on a nation that had been calculating for weeks to spend the bulk of that day in the merriment and the booze and the partying surrounding Super Bowl XXI. And you remember, I prayed, "God have mercy on us as a nation for our fragrant, open, defiance of Your right to have a day that is peculiarly set apart unto Yourself, for the good of the creature and the glory of the creator." Could it be that there is an umbilical cord of moral relationship between January 26 and Super Bowl madness and January 28 and Challenger sadness? And the irony is the sadness came through the same instrument as the madness. The same tube to which people were glued on Sunday, they were glued to it on Tuesday. "Is that your god that you worship? I'll let your god say some strange things to you." Could it be that there's a relation between the national desecration of the Lord's Day and that national humiliation of the Challenger's destruction?

The second question I asked under this heading: could it be that there's a relation between the sudden destruction of seven adults and the heartless destruction of millions year in and year out who never see the light of day? While those seven astronauts were blown to pieces in an instant and some of us reliving the scene in our minds, find our spirits still shocked and numbed; some of us have shed tears. We have felt the sting of the lose of a friend, husband, wife, mother. And God knows I do not speak as a heartless man. But listen, all seven of those had a chance to grow up and see the trees and the brooks as little children. They had the chance to grow up and go to school and learn their ABCs and choose their careers. They all came to adulthood. Some of them enjoyed the blessings of marriage and parenthood, and another, the elevated and elevating realm of classical music, the single woman with her PhD. They had a choice. But now listen, seven lives snuffed out in a moment, but I took my calculator out this morning, and from the time they were blown to pieces on Tuesday to 12:25 Sunday morning, do you know that somewhere between 22 and 24,000 babies have been sucked to pieces out of mother's wombs, chopped up in little pieces by the curettage of the surgeon's knife? Why this hypocritical selective morning? I asked you Mr. Rather, I asked you Mr. Brokaw, I asked you Mr. Meese, why the sad face over seven and not a word for the helpless 22,000 who died in blood in the past four days? In the name of the God of heaven, what kind of compassion is that--so riddled with hypocrisy? If it's love for human life, it's not that selective, my friend. I didn't hear one newscaster suggest that maybe Roe vs. Wade is that which burst a fuel line. "O no, the answer must be found only in technology,

you see." They've got a closed universe. Well, I tell you, we don't live in a closed universe. You read your Bible; the destruction of nations, the destruction of individuals, according to the Bible, has moral causes. And this is an open-ended universe where the sovereign God who's the moral governor of the universe can break in where and when He will, whether it's opening up the heavens and the fountains of the deeps and bringing a flood to obliterate a whole generation except for one man and his family, or whether, according the Bible, He moves a soldier to take an arrow at a venture and say, "I'll just shot somewhere and somehow," and zango, he gets the king disguised, and he hits him in the chink of the armor. You children, they don't talk to you about that in school, do they? They don't tell you a sovereign God guides arrows in battles. That's why some of us are committed with every fiber of our being to a Christian school. We want to develop Christian minds with young people who think as Christians, who think Biblically about history and reality and about the dignity of human life. I say, the only consistent person who has any genuine morning for the dignify of the life of those seven is the one who mourns for the life of the 22,000 that have been blotted out between Tuesday and this morning. 1.55 million every year, almost 100,000 alone in the state of California last year. They came out number one.

And then could it be, under this same heading (a nation cannot flagrantly disregard God's moral law and not receive His judgments), there's a relationship between Super Bowl mania and the humiliation of Tuesday and the constant destruction of the innocent by abortion upon demand, abortion as a cover-up for illicit sex among non-consenting or non-married partners, or a cover-up for careless sex among married partners? And it's a known fact to anyone who knows anything about the abortion glut. There isn't one abortion in a thousand that has anything to do with life-threatening circumstances to the mother. It's become a convenient way for unbridled sexual activity. It's a form of birth prevention. And if you don't believe that and want to challenge me, meet me at the door and I'll sit down and show you the facts. I'll give you the names of doctors who perform them and let them tell you.

The third heading under this heading: could it be that there was a relation between the destruction of the central figure in this mission and the rejection of God's order for the role of a mother? And here's where I know some of you will be angry with me, but I don't care. I am not saying there is; I'm asking a question, "Could it be?" Who was the central figure of this whole space shuttle trip, so much so that some were saying, "Unfair, it was Christa McAuliffe," from the very town I met my wife and married her, Concord, New Hampshire, the very town my mother was born and reared, where I spent all my vacations every summer. And she was set forth as the fully liberated woman. She was married, had a family, had a consenting husband, had a career as a school teacher. And now she could even have a second temporary career as an astronaut. "Anything you want, baby, you can get it if you want it bad enough." I'm not saying she was an outspoken feminist. Don't you say that I said that. I didn't. But she was set forth as such a model of virtue, even though pictures showed her little daughter crying when her mommy left, "Don't leave me, mommy," even though she could have gone home weekends and chose not to. And for four months left a six-year old without a mother, not in a path of duty, not in a path of necessity. Could it be? I only ask the question, my friend, when my Bible says the older women are to train the younger women to be workers at home. What is the great tragedy of this young generation? Most of the very kids who would sitting in the classrooms watching by the television when that woman was tragically snuffed out with the others, many of those kids did not go home that day to a mother or to a dad. Many of

them had to wait for Mom to come home from work. They didn't come in from school to a loving embrace of a mother through those developmental years. They were put in daycare centers practically as soon as they come out of the womb. The percentages are frightening of children who have never known what it is to have a mother who's a keeper at home. Could it be that God is saying, "America, enough"? You want to make heroines of people? Make them of the ones I make them. You know who the heroines are? You mothers here who are willing to bury your life all during those developmental years of your children, willing to live on a shoestring, willing to do without, willing to say no to expensive vacations and expensive cloths, willing to say no to a thousand things that your sons and daughters may have a mother at home who buries herself in the development of their life and character. You're the heroines of God's Word, not the Christa McAuliffes "who can get it all, baby."

Well, I must close on one final note, and then I'll be done. My fourth heading is this: we ought to lay to heart this most vivid illustration of the last day, which most of us will probably ever witness. How does God describe the last day when it dawns? Turn to three passages with me, please. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul is speaking of the return of the Lord in verse 13 with its reference to the people of God, and he ends with the words in verse 18: "Comfort one another with these words." And what a joy it was this week to minister in one of our homes with this passage and to see the comfort of the Holy Spirit poured into the hearts of grieving loved-ones. But now that same coming of Jesus has another side to it. Verses 1 to 3 of chapter 5:

"But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that anything be written unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord [the second coming, the final day] so comes as a thief in the night. When they are saying, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction comes upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall in no wise escape."

When they are saying, "Peace, safety, safety, peace, peace, safety, safety, peace," with no warning, sudden destruction comes! And what kind of destruction? Inescapable. I hear the words going over in my mind: "104 percent power. Cut back to 65 percent. Good burn in three engines. All is well. Peace and safety in your launch seats; peace and safety on your way to orbit." Then sudden destruction came quick as the flash of an eye, and there was no escape! Did you see the fireball? Sudden destruction! What a picture of the last day! Turn over to 2 Thessalonians 1, our second passage because it introduces the elements of the last day. Verses 7 and 8:

"And to you that are afflicted rest with us, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of His power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of His might,"

My friend, listen, if a half a million pounds of two of God's most elementary elements in His universe, a little thimble full of God's hydrogen and oxygen in that central tank-- if a fireball like that exploding can take that massive space shuttle and everything in it and disintegrate it, what will it be when the creator of heaven and earth and all the galaxies comes in the fireball of the released energy of deity to consume this world in its present state and all His enemies? You want a picture of the last day? We had

perhaps the most vivid we'll every have in our lifetime. The third passage--and with this I close--because in this passage, the exhortation with which I close is contained 2 Peter 3. Peter is speaking of the coming of the Lord, urging believers not to grow weary, remembering that God is patient, yearning for the salvation of men, delaying the return of His Son that others might yet be saved. He says in verses 10 to 12,

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in all holy living and godliness, looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God, by reason of which the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?"

And out of that last fireball of the returning judgment and purifying grace of God, what will emerge? Blessed be God, not a little bit of debris on the Florida shore, but verse 13: "According to His promise, we look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwells righteousness." What will emerge from God's final fireball is the new heavens and the new earth, and in it and on it, all of those who have been made new creatures in Christ Jesus. That horrible fireball had only one result: horrible, irreversible, sudden destruction! God's final fireball will have two: the destruction of His enemies, the purification of the heavens and the earth, and emerging out of it a new heavens and a new earth with all of the redeemed humanity having been given their resurrection bodies. And so shall we ever be together with the Lord enjoying the blessings of the new creation.

We ought to lay to heart, dear people, this most vivid illustration of the last day which most of us will probably ever witness unless we are present to witness that fireball of the coming Christ. O, listen to Peter's words, believer: "Give diligence to be found in Him in a pattern of holy living, a pattern of Godliness." I fear for some of you. You've begun to make it. You've begun to climb the corporation ladder; you've begun to get your promotions. You don't have to eat at Burger King all the time now when you go out with the family. You've begun to accumulate things. But O my young Christian friend, listen to me. Don't let your heart get entwined with anything that's going up in God's final fireball, because it will. It will all go up. Don't let it get inside your heart. Whatever God entrusts, hold it with an open hand. And my sinner friend, what can I say to you? You see what you're doing? You're strutting around as though you were piggy-backed on that Challenger space shuttle saying, "Na, this business about things being volatile and dangerous, that's just to scare people. Nothing will happen to me. Let it blow up, I'll make it." No, no, my friend, if you'd been piggy-backed, you'd be blown to pieces, and you will be at the coming of Christ. Jesus Christ is going to take vengeance on you who won't obey His Gospel, you who will not come to know God in the way of His revelation. May God grant that you'll not come hardened and insensitive to another loud voice of God's mercy speaking through the horrible tragedy of this past Tuesday. I end up where I began. Jesus said when we see these tragedies, are we to stand back and say, "O, look, look, those people who were killed, whose blood was mingled by Pilate at a sacrificial feast, they were terrible sinners. Those who were killed by the tower, that must have been God's judgment on them. They must have been secret hypocrites, secret thieves and adulterers and idolaters."? Jesus said, "No, except you repent, you shall perish." My friend, listen, these things are not meant that you may stand back and say, "O, God wouldn't do that to me. I'm too good." No, they're to remind you God is an angry God in the face

of unforgiven, uncleansed sin. Repent, repent, flee to Christ. Seek a refuge, and when that day comes, the fire will not consume you. But the one who brings it will gather you to Himself. and that forever.

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