

Lord

THE GOD WHO

of the

SUFFERS WITH US

Tragic

Al Truesdale



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FOREWORD

The gospel of Jesus Christ is simple, but it is not simplistic. It assures us of final deliverance from evil, but it does not supply us with pat answers to today's problems and today's suffering. When tragedy invades our lives, we are tempted as Christians to give glib words of assurance, quoting favorite Bible texts and assuring the sufferer that it is all for the best. But what we too often fail to remember is that we are *not yet* in that kingdom which is to come.

There is a sense, of course, in which the kingdom of God has *already* come. It has come in Jesus Christ, the Father's only Son, incarnate in our human flesh and proclaiming God's final victory over evil. But in order to bring in his kingdom, he participated in the human suffering of "this present evil age." At one level, therefore, we may view the cross as the supreme tragedy. It was a flagrant miscarriage of justice in which an innocent man, known for his wisdom and his loving compassion, was strung up on a Roman cross, stripped of his dignity, and condemned to excruciating physical torture ending in death. Further, his mental and spiritual suffering was to feel abandoned and forsaken by the very loving Father he had proclaimed.

But the tragedy was even deeper than that. This was not just human suffering. What makes this the supreme, indeed the unique, tragedy is that this was not only a man but also God—God incarnate—whom we, the human race, were torturing to death.

The gospel is that this tortured man, God incarnate, who freely came to share in our suffering, was raised from death on the third day and appeared to his disciples. It is in the light of his resurrection, therefore, and his exaltation to supreme power over the universe (yet to be revealed) that Christians are called to look on our tragedies as we share in human suffering today. There are no glib answers, and we must avoid clichés and platitudes as we seek to comfort those who suffer. We must learn to lament and rage against the evil that ruins lives and inflicts pain. The suffering of the cross was not a charade. It was real.

The great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis plumbed the depths of sorrow years after he had written his erudite work of theodicy, *The Problem of Pain*. The film *Shadowlands* depicts him going through the deep waters of tragedy that issued in his very different approach in his later book *A Grief Observed*.

This work by Al Truesdale is also erudite. His thinking ranges over the dramatic tragedies of ancient Greece, the thinkers of the Enlightenment, the science behind the great natural disasters, the place of lament in Christian worship, the wisdom of the book of Job, Paul's understanding of the foolishness of God, and the resurrection hope. But he always brings the discussion back to real-life stories of God's suffering people. This is, therefore, a book to help those who are trying to cope with real-life tragedy and to come to terms with what it means for their journey of faith. For pastors and Christian counselors who are called to support and counsel those who encounter tragedy, it is necessary reading.

—Thomas A. Noble
Nazarene Theological Seminary

INTRODUCTION

I was introduced to tragedy on the third Sunday of my first pastorate.

As Esther and I entered the parsonage after Sunday morning worship, the telephone rang. Brad, a church board member and diligent follower of Jesus, spoke through torrential sobs. “Pastor, Mason committed suicide early this morning.” While playing Russian roulette, in a drunken stupor, Brad’s son had fired a fatal slug into his brain.

**Either Jesus is *Lord of the tragic*,
or he is not Lord of all.**

Unequipped with answers, I simply acted as Ezekiel did with the dazed Babylonian exiles: For days, “I sat where [the people] sat” (Ezek. 3:15, KJV).

The Gospel of John proclaims Jesus Lord of creation. Matthew affirms he is Lord of the Sabbath. Mark declares Jesus is Lord of the storm. Paul preaches Christ as conqueror of sin and death (Rom. 5:18-21).

But who announces Jesus is Lord of the tragic?

Either Jesus is *Lord of the tragic*, or he is not Lord of all. Either he provides hope for those suffering tragedy, or the gospel is inadequate. It is one thing to show how Jesus's lordship addresses sin in which blame can be assigned. It is quite another to show how his lordship enfolds and provides hope for those who suffer as a result of tragic events beyond their control. The line between blameworthiness and unavoidable trauma can sometimes be so blurred as to defy rational distinction.

Tragedy often defies answers and resolution. Disturbing, even maddening, elements of futility, confusion, uncertainty, and fragmentation may persist. "Tragedy," observes Jennifer Geddes, can "rupture our ability to see clearly."¹ Addressing tragedy in a *Christian way* requires more than sympathy, empathy, and superficial answers. It requires redemption, God's sure presence, and empowering Christian hope.

Based upon the contents of some books that extensively treat the Christian faith, discussion of tragedy is scarce.² More point-

1. Jennifer Geddes, "Religion and the Tragic," *Literature and Theology* 18, no. 2 (June 2005): 98 (as quoted by Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller, *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature, and Tragic Theory* [Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016], 3).

2. In his massive *Church Dogmatics*, Swiss theologian Karl Barth mentions tragedy once (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961). In her magisterial treatment of Jesus's crucifixion, Anglican theologian Fleming Rutledge leads us in worship before the cross. But in her six-hundred-page-plus exposition, tragedy is not discussed (*The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017]). In his stellar two-volume *Systematic Theology*, Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson discusses the problem of evil, but tragedy is never a distinct topic (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001]; *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Works of God* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001]). Tragedy is not mentioned by Methodist Theologian Geoffrey Wainwright in his majestic *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

edly, Wendy Farley says, “Christian theology has tended to be strenuously antitragic.”³

Tragedy plagues much of human existence. Why does it not receive more theological attention? Perhaps it is because tragedy challenges traditional theological explanations. It does not fit neatly into the category of sin and evil. So the topic might appear alien to our customary theological resources, even downright irreconcilable if not antagonistic.

If the Christian faith is to encompass *all* human life, how does Jesus as Lord and Redeemer speak meaningfully and hopefully to Marsha?

Marsha and her husband, Kevin, adopted two abandoned Chinese children. They and their three older children were admired for their generous love and commitment. Then the unexpected happened. Marsha developed life-threatening cancer. Instead of showing loyalty to Marsha and the children, Kevin abandoned the family for another “lover,” leaving Marsha caught in a vortex of confusion and vulnerability.

This book is for Marsha and others who suffer tragedy in various forms. It is for parish clergy ministering to persons suffering tragedy.⁴ It is for Christians who love and care for the Marshas. It is also for this author, for whom the seemingly bottomless specter of tragedy regularly haunts his Christian faith.

The New Testament teaches us to find strength and solace for our own sufferings in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. By considering his sufferings, Christians discover that amid the worst that

3. Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 12.

4. For an extended treatment of how tragedy and trauma can be dealt with by Christian congregations, see Megan Warner, Christopher Southgate, Carla A. Grosch-Miller, and Hilary Ison, eds., *Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma*, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology (London: Routledge, 2021).

can befall them, “the Creative Word keeps company with those whom he has called his own.”⁵

This book “considers” (see Lam. 1:12) how the creator-redeemer God in radical *presence* identifies with the “ordinary ways of men [and women].”⁶ It voices the Christian affirmation that God definitively reveals himself in Jesus Christ. It offers no easy answers for macrosocial tragedies such as the failed state of Haiti or the grinding social chaos that seems baked into some societies. Nor does it provide a theodicy (explaining why an all-loving and all-powerful God permits evil in the world).⁷ As theologian Donald M. MacKinnon correctly states, “It is sheer nonsense to speak of the Christian religion as offering a solution to the problem of evil.”⁸ N. T. Wright agrees: “To ‘solve’ the problem of evil in the present age is to belittle it.”⁹

Instead, the book is consistently steered by the life, passion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ and by the hope and meaning to which they give birth and support. It attempts to address tragedy only as the Scriptures make possible. A person’s Christian faith can be jeopardized either by claiming to know more than the

5. Donald M. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1968), 93.

6. *Ibid.*, 94.

7. See Al Truesdale, *If God Is God, Then Why? Letters from Oklahoma City* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1996). Also, see N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006); C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Geoffrey Bles, Centenary Press, 1940). In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton famously attempted “in prose and rhyme” to “justify the ways of God to men” (*Paradise Lost*, bk. 1, lines 16, 26).

8. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 92. According to MacKinnon, theoretical solutions to the problem of evil avoid “confrontation with the concrete and particular,” the intractable instances of “wickedness and suffering” in the world (Brian Hebblethwaite, “MacKinnon and the Problem of Evil,” in *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon*, ed. Kenneth Surin [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 131).

9. Wright, *Evil and the Justice*, 71.

Scriptures support or by failing to give adequate voice to God’s Word. There are unanswerable *questions*. But more importantly, there is an abiding *Presence* that provides strength to live creatively and confidently in the midst of tragedy. Throughout, the author seeks to avoid “false consolation in a world like this”¹⁰ as well as an “anxious shrinking”¹¹ from the reality of tragedy.

For a thorough treatment of the important questions tragedy poses for God’s transcendence and aseity (self-sufficiency, self-existence, or self-origination), see the recent work by Khegan M. Delpont.¹²

Attempts to write this book have been repeatedly set aside, not because the topic is unimportant, but because of daunting questions for which there may be no satisfactory answers. One lengthy pause occurred when the young mother of an infant and a three-year-old was widowed because her husband died of COVID-19.

Readers will judge whether the decision to proceed was justified.

10. Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

11. *Ibid.*, 2.

12. Khegan M. Delpont, *On Tragedy and Transcendence: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Donald MacKinnon and Rowan Williams* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021). Delpont extensively addresses the question of how God’s transcendent goodness can be reconciled with the negativity of tragedy.

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LIMITING THE RANGE OF TRAGEDY

*The reality of human suffering “continues to bleed through
the explanations that attempt to account for it.”¹*

—Wendy Farley

Since the Greeks in the fifth century BC, tragedy has been a topic for human reflection.

The most famous writers of Greek tragedy were Aeschylus (ca. 525–ca. 456 BC), Sophocles (ca. 496–ca. 406 BC), and Euripides (ca. 480–ca. 406 BC), whose works were performed in open-air theaters. Many of their productions are performed today, often in contemporary form. Familiar Greek mythology—Greek religion—most often provided the grid upon which Greek tragedies developed. Some famous Greek tragedies were *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus the King*. Tragedies were commissioned for competition and were performed during drama festivals. Because of their popularity, they were performed throughout the Greek-speaking world. Inspired by Greek tragedy, the Romans later developed their own forms.

1. Farley, *Tragic Vision*, 19.

The hero in Greek tragedies strives for greatness. A mostly good person, he is marked by admirable personal qualities; his goal is virtuous. However, he is brought down by personal failures and circumstances over which he has no control. Too late, the hero recognizes fate has the final word.²

In *Poetics*, Aristotle uses the Greek word *hamartia* to describe the “tragic flaw.”³ There is no overtone of guilt or moral failure in the term. Error of judgment, not vice and depravity, occasions the failure.⁴ Aristotle makes a sharp distinction between a tragic figure who is a good person and an “extremely bad man.”⁵ The tragic hero exhibits a certain “moral purpose” and “element of character.”⁶

The change in the hero’s fortunes, says Aristotle, is from happiness to misery. The change occurs, not because of “depravity, but in some sense because of great error of judgment.”⁷ A successful tragedy must arouse pity and fear in the audience—pity for

2. Richard Rutherford states in *Classical Literature: A Concise History* that Greek tragedy frustrated the audience’s expectations for order in the world ([Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005], 51). Often a Greek tragedy concludes with a *deus ex machina*—that is, a god appears on high to interpret events or declare the future. But humans, not the gods, suffer the consequences (51-52).

3. Aristotle, *De Poetica (Poetics)*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1968), 1453a10, 16.

4. *Ibid.*, 1453a9.

5. *Ibid.*, 1453a4.

6. *Ibid.*, 1454a15. The Greeks had a special term for failure that resulted from an arrogant grab for power: *hubris*. “The person or the nation who is possessed by the unbridled lust for self-assertion is driven headlong into reckless self-confidence and so to destruction.” Lusting for more power than Fate destines inevitably incurs divine jealousy and results in ruin (Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, *Greece and Rome*, pt. 1 (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1962), 35).

The Greeks detested arrogance and self-assertion. Wise persons will obey the inner laws of harmony and proportion that promote excellence. They had a term for this quality: *sophrosyne*.

7. Aristotle, *De Poetica (Poetics)*, 1453a9.

the tragic hero who is marked by “undeserved misfortune,” and fear in the audience that such a dreadful thing might happen to them.⁸ To make tragedies even more intense, they must occur within the best families.⁹

Sophocles’s tragedy *Oedipus the King* is one of the best known. Oedipus blinded himself in despair after learning that as prophesied, he had unwittingly killed his own father—King Laius—and married his mother, Jocasta. Tragedy lay in the fact that Oedipus, who was marked by compassion and a commitment to justice, had done everything in his power to avoid the prophecy’s fulfillment. His personal strength and character were key factors. Unaware that he had killed Laius, in an effort to terminate a plague ravaging Thebes, Oedipus went looking for the killer and found himself. According to Aristotle in *Poetics*, the story of Oedipus illustrated the perfect tragedy.

Elizabethan Shakespeare largely accepted Aristotle’s model. He wrote and performed what are traditionally considered to be six to ten tragedies, depending on how they are classified. Among them are *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. All are regularly studied and frequently performed. Dana Gioia thinks Shakespeare’s romances—*The Tempest*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *Pericles*—represent “a Christian transfiguration of tragedy. Potentially tragic plots end not in death and violence but in clemency, compassion, and reconciliation—often accomplished by the surprising resurrection of a character presumed dead.”¹⁰

Novelists have treated tragedy from numerous angles.

8. *Ibid.*, 1452a30, 1453b10.

9. *Ibid.*, 1453a20, 1454a9.

10. Dana Gioia, “Christianity and Poetry,” *First Things*, August/September 2022, 25.

In *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne details the tragedy of adulteress Hester Prynne, who, in order to protect the reputation of her partner, the young Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale, lives her life in tragic isolation and scorn while raising Pearl, the lovely daughter born of the illicit affair.

In *Moby-Dick* (1851), Herman Melville tells of Ahab, captain of the whaling ship *Pequod*, who is driven to self-destruction by an obsessive determination to kill a whale named Moby-Dick. To satisfy his obsession, he is willing to sink his ship and kill his crew.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck tells the immortal story of the Joads, a poverty-stricken Oklahoma family chasing the dream of economic relief in California. Though caught up in the swirling tragedy of the Great American Dust Bowl and the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Joads survive nobly, as climaxed by daughter Rose of Sharon. Abandoned by her husband, Rose of Sharon fulfills her name by lending her breast to a starving man shortly after the birth of her stillborn child. Her generous act is a symbol of hope amid wrenching tragedy.

Theologian Donald M. MacKinnon observes that much of what characterizes worldviews today is drawn from ancient and modern tragedy. This “is incompatible with the Christian understanding of existence” as set forth in the New Testament. In ancient and modern tragedy there is an “irresistible element in the scheme of things [fate] that brings even the most steadfast moral [faithfulness] to naught.”¹¹

In Greek mythology, there were three divine Moirai (Gk., “shares” or “portions”), also known as “the Fates.”¹² They were

11. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 100-101.

12. The Romans, whose gods did not have the individuality of the Greek gods, merged their Parcae with the Moirai. See the three Fates spinning the web of human destiny at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fate-Greek-and-Roman-mythology>.

weaving goddesses, female children of Zeus and Themis named Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. Each had a distinct character and role. Together they largely determined people's lives from birth to death.

Clotho, "the Spinner," *spun* the thread of a person's life from birth to death. Once a person's thread had been spun, Lachesis, "the allotter," always dressed in white, determined a person's destiny according to how much thread Clotho had spun. Atropos, known as "the inevitable" or "the inflexible," was in charge of cutting a person's thread and choosing the mechanism of death. Plato said the role of Atropos was to make sure the decisions Clotho and Lachesis made would never be reversed.¹³ So the three goddesses spun (Clotho), drew out (Lachesis), and cut (Atropos) the thread of every person's life. The Greek god Hades enforced their judgments.

**Sadly, and probably unwittingly, many
Christians "bite and swallow" the
substance of Greek mythology when
speaking of how life unfolds.**

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) quotes Seneca the Roman Stoic philosopher as saying that the Fates lead the willing and drag into compliance the unwilling.¹⁴ Even the Greek deities were bound by fate. They acted in ways that made sure events followed

13. Plato, *Laws*, bk. 12, sec. 960.c, translated by A. E. Taylor, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 1504-5.

14. Augustine, *The City of God*, bk. 5, chap. 8, in vol. 2 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (series 1), ed. Philip Schaff (1886; repr., Grand Rapids: Chris-

what the Moirai decreed. Even supreme Zeus could not reverse their major decisions. However, the extent to which he was bound is debated.

Sadly, and probably unwittingly, many Christians “bite and swallow” the substance of Greek mythology when speaking of how life unfolds. They have not examined the mythological underpinnings or recognized how alien Greek mythology is to the Christian faith.

The prophet Isaiah pronounced God’s judgment upon the people of Judah for turning away from trust in Yahweh, who had delivered them from Pharaoh’s tyranny, and for putting trust in the two Syrian gods of fate—Gad and Meni. Forsaking the Lord, they “set a table for Fortune” and filled “cups . . . for Destiny” (Isa. 65:11).

All too imperceptibly, pagan values can embed themselves and be expressed in our language and thought. For example, think of how easily some Christians sing “Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be),”¹⁵ a song made popular by Doris Day in the 1956 movie *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. The song advocates a “cheerful fatalism” and has no place in Christian thought or vocabulary. A close cousin to “Que Sera, Sera” is often heard when Christians say, “Everybody has a time to die.” The pagan philosophy is even tucked into the lilting Christmas song “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” In his inimitable voice, Frank Sinatra hopes “we will all be together *if the fates allow*.”¹⁶

tian Classics Ethereal Library [CCEL]), <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102/npnf102.iv.V.8.html>.

15. Jay Livingston and Ray Evans, “Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)” (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1955).

16. Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” Copyright © 1944 (Renewed 1972) Leo Feist, Inc. All Rights of Leo Feist, Inc., assigned to EMI Catalogue Partnership; emphasis added.

Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos could not have said it better. Christians say these things, all the while making regular visits to physicians, chasing vitamin supplements, and repeatedly asking God to extend their lives.

Another cousin of fate is the statement too freely thrown around by some Christians: “Everything happens for a reason.” Whatever the statement intends, hiding within it is a belief that everything happens according to some unseen and unavoidable plan that dictates events. The philosophy of determinism lurks in such language. Humans are but helpless instruments of an elusive plan. Finite freedom is consumed by the unseen sovereign plan.

A Christian’s life is not determined by fate.

**Life is held in the care of our
all-loving God, who alone created and
sustains the heavens and the earth.**

Belief in divine decrees can assume bizarre forms. On the morning of April 25, 2023, while treating those wounded in a brutal civil war in Sudan, American citizen Dr. Bushra Ibnauf Sulieman was stabbed to death in front of his family by a roving band of strangers. For days, battles between two rival Sudanese commanders had raged in the capital city of Khartoum. Dr. Sulieman had divided his work between Iowa City, Iowa, and Khartoum. Friends had urged Dr. Sulieman and his family to evacuate to the United States.

He responded, “Nothing will happen to us except what God has decreed.” Think of the extended implications of his statement. For such to be true, the God of mercy and love would first have

had to decree the devastating conflict between the rival Sudanese commanders. Next he would have had to decree and create the roving band of murderers the civil war unleashed. Furthermore, Dr. Sulieman had freely chosen to remain in the conflict though he had opportunities to leave.¹⁷

Do Christians who grant power to fate in any form recognize the implications? Even if unintended, they are ascribing ultimate power and allegiance to some other impersonal force behind the universe than the creator and redeemer God whom the Bible repeatedly says is characterized by steadfast, covenantal love (Deut. 7:9; Pss. 26:3; 36:7; 42:8; 48:9; Isa. 63:7; Jer. 9:24).

According to the New Testament, a Christian's life is not determined by fate. Life is held in the care of our all-loving God, who alone created and sustains the heavens and the earth. In love, God creates free humans, though our freedom is limited. Human freedom can be maximized, flourish, when exercised in keeping with God's love and character (Gal. 5:1; 1 Pet. 2:16). Even Screwtape, the demon in *The Screwtape Letters*, knows that God wants to fill the universe with replicas of himself, people whose lives on "a miniature scale will be qualitatively like his own."¹⁸

It is a fundamental betrayal of God's love, as well as a failure to attend to the complexity of finite freedom, to believe, as did Augustine, that God destines the time of death for each person.¹⁹

One of the saddest refrains to escape a Christian's lips is to hear him or her speak as a Greek pagan. Some Christians, for ex-

17. Ellen Knickmeyer, "A Powerhouse US Doctor Slain in Sudan, 'Killed for Nothing,'" Associated Press, April 30, 2023, AP News, <https://apnews.com/article/sudan-war-americans-doctor-dcf5d2aeb3e70cd37fbce9013a52a0a6>.

18. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Geoffrey Bles, Centenary Press, 1942), 48.

19. Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 1, chap. 11, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102/npnf102.iv.ii.xii.html>. Augustine's belief is at home in a doctrine of predestination.

ample, believe the stars or the zodiac play the same role as the Fates. Do they not thereby betray their expressed trust in the one living God of holy love?

Paganism is a crafty and difficult enemy to defeat. As ancient Israel repeatedly demonstrated, and as the prophets consistently condemned, polytheism comes naturally to a fallen world. Thoughtful, diligent, and practiced monotheism—one God Almighty over all (Deut. 6:4)—requires persistent effort. Abandoning the “gods” of Egypt was always, and continues to be, a work in progress. Sociologist Max Weber said that in our values and desires, polytheism always lurks as a possibility.²⁰

The good news that the victorious Christ could free people from crippling fear and helplessness was one reason many first-century Greeks and Romans were attracted to the Christian faith. Christian missionaries proclaimed that the power of the Fates and Fortuna—the Roman goddess of human destiny²¹—

20. Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Lexington, KY: Ulan Press, 2012), 70, 123, 147-49.

21. *Fortuna* was the Roman goddess of luck for men; *Fortuna Muliebris* was the goddess of luck for women. *Fortuna* did not disappear from Christian thought. It played a frequent and serious role in medieval Christianity. In *The Inferno*, for example, Dante says that God, whose “transcendent wisdom hath no bound,” placed all “worldly goods” under Fortune’s “ministering power.” Fortune presides over all “worldly goods.” At one time, Fortune may cause one “race” and “land” to succeed. At another time, she causes another “race” and “land” to succeed. She manages “life’s fleeting goods” with a “varying hand.” They are obedient to her “all-controlling will.” She is even called a deity. Earth is Fortune’s domain (Dante, *The Inferno*, canto 7, 61-96 [London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1833], 64-65, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/infernodante00wriggoog/page/n92/mode/2up?view=theater>).

Fortune played a major role in the thought of philosopher/theologian Boethius (ca. 480–524; *The Consolation of Philosophy*). For an exposition of how Christian poets in the medieval era believed the planets were related to Fortune, see C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 105-12.

could be broken by Christ, who on the cross had “disarmed the principalities and powers” (Col. 2:15). They were among what the apostle Paul called “the weak and beggarly elemental spirits” (Gal. 4:9). N. T. Wright says the “elemental spirits” had kept former pagans, now Spirit-filled Christians, “under lock and key.”²² Christ, the apostles proclaimed, could empower people to serve the sovereign God of love, who wants life to flourish in the context of Christian freedom (5:1). No matter life’s circumstances, Paul announced from a Roman prison that all that is “pure,” “lovely,” “gracious,” and excellent can flourish in Jesus’s disciples (Phil. 4:8).

True, there are many things over which we have little or no control. But those limitations are set within the frame of God’s love and power. The apostle Paul voiced the defining center of Christian faith when he asked, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Rom. 8:35). He answered, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vv. 37-39). Moreover, “If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” (vv. 31-32).

Christians should face tragedy as people marked by Easter faith.

22. N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 98.

No matter how oppressive tragedy might be, it must never be given the final word. Tragedy, says Khegan Delpont, is bounded by God's grace.²³ For Christians, Easter faith, hope of bodily resurrection, and anticipation of new creation have the final word. Through the Holy Spirit, the victory of the risen and ascended Christ is intended for all his sisters and brothers, no matter the "height" or "depth" of tragedy. That certainty should mark our language and practice. Paul assured the Christians in Colossae, some of whom were former pagans trapped in Greek mythology, that on the cross, Jesus Christ "disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them" (Col. 2:15; see vv. 13-15). In this confidence Paul faced his death at Roman hands, and early Christians triumphed over the executioner's craft. In the second century, a Roman governor urged Polycarp (ca. 69–ca. 155) to sacrifice to Caesar as deity. "Swear, and I will set you at liberty, reproach Christ." Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"²⁴

Christians are not immune to tragedy. As we shall see in chapters 7 and 8, sometimes tragedy is the result of evil committed by others. But whatever the cause, Christians should face tragedy as people marked by Easter faith, not as pagans enslaved to Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. By the power of the Holy Spirit, our dispositions and language in times of tragedy can evidence we are children of our heavenly Father, from whom nothing can separate us. Otherwise, in times of crisis our trust in the victorious Christ

23. Delpont, *On Tragedy and Transcendence*, 205.

24. *The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna concerning the Martyrdom of the Holy Polycarp*, chap. 9, in vol. 1 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; repr., Grand Rapids: CCEL), https://ccel.org/ccel/polycarp/martyrdom_of_polycarp/anf01.iv.iv.ix.html.

will vaporize and our witness to a world in need of a Savior will fall silent.

Imposing *fate* on the Bible and Christian faith is a cruel betrayal of the Scriptures and Easter faith. Resurrection hope, not despair, is the North Star by which we navigate our way through life, the gravitational center around which we revolve (1 Cor. 15:12-28).

*I know that my Redeemer lives,
What comfort this sweet sentence gives!
He lives, he lives, who once was dead,
He lives, my everlasting Head.*

.....
*He lives, all glory to his name,
He lives, my Jesus still the same;
O the sweet joy this sentence gives,
I know that my Redeemer lives.²⁵*

In *The Lord of the Tragic* our interest is in neither the relationship between Christian theology and *tragic* literature nor tragedy as Aristotle and Shakespeare treated it.²⁶ For us, tragedy does not arouse pity because people who experience it belong to society's "best families." Nor are they brought down by *fate* and *the gods* through their own unintended failures.

Our interest is in people like Tammy and Jeff, a young married couple expecting twins—a girl and a boy. As the Thanksgiving season approached, their dreams for the children and for parenthood soared. Tammy and Jeff had names ready: Pressley

25. Samuel Medley (1738-99), "I Know That My Redeemer Lives," Hymnary, https://hymnary.org/text/i_know_that_my_redeemer_lives_what_joy/compare?selected=SHVA1816-L.

26. For a multifaceted treatment of Christian theology and tragedy, see Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller, *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature, and Tragic Theory* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016).

and Preston. But their hopes were quickly dashed; the infants were not healthy. They lived only a couple of hours.

Thanksgiving was marked by sorrow. In grief, Tammy and Jeff began to suspect the babies' sudden deaths had happened because they had done something terribly wrong and were now being punished. But as faithful Christians they could not honestly identify such a grievous cause. They asked, "If not that, then why?" They had witnessed miracles in the lives of others, so why not for them?

Jeff appraised tragedy in two words: "It stinks."

We also have in mind people like Kate. She was a university professor, a mom in her thirties with a promising academic career, when suddenly she was "stripped down to the studs" by cancer.²⁷ One moment she was an ordinary person with ordinary interests. The next moment a new unwanted life-threatening reality occupied every space in her imagination. Time stood still. She immediately began to ask, "Why?" "God, are you there?" "What does all this mean?" Her world of certainty had collapsed. Similarly, a clergyman who received news his two-year-old grandson had been diagnosed with leukemia said, "On Monday, at 4:00 a.m., our world changed." Their cries echo C. S. Lewis's plaintive observation after the long death of his wife, Helen Joy Gresham. Lewis felt as though he was "under the harrow and could not escape."²⁸

Like Job, some of Kate's well-meaning Christian friends had answers from God. "God is just writing a better story for you," some said. "Everything happens for a reason," others assured her. Answers continued: "God has a better plan for your life." "This is a test, and it will only make you stronger." "All things work to-

27. Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018), xvi.

28. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1961), 28.

gether for good.” “Well, at least you have your son and your husband.” And “It’s going to get better, I promise.” Job and Kate could have said “Amen!” to Howard Barker: Tragedy refuses “trivialization of experience.”²⁹

Some answers “God had sent” made him look downright sadistic.

Laura R. Shannonhouse, associate professor in the Department of Counseling and Psychological Services at Georgia State University in Atlanta, offers a definition of tragedy with which we can work. Tragedy is “an event, or series of events, that may be experienced individually (or collectively) causing suffering and distress, that can affect us across a series of domains (i.e., physical, emotional, social, spiritual, coping, and creative).³⁰

For Reflection or Discussion

1. What are the major differences between the classical Greek tragic hero and ordinary Christians who experience tragedy?

2. Compare how the Greeks define tragedy with how Christians of all social locations might encounter it.

29. Howard Barker, “49 Asides for a Tragic Theatre,” *Guardian*, February 10, 1986, 11.

30. Jamie D. Aten, “Resilience and Tragedy: An Interview with Dr. Laura Shannonhouse on Finding a New ‘Normal,’” *Psychology Today*, January 31, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/hope-resilience/201901/resilience-and-tragedy>.

3. Discuss the incompatibility between the Greek understanding of fate and the lives of Christians, which are entrusted to the God of love and grace. Reflect on the life-and-death implications of Colossians 2:13-15.

4. Why are shades of fate, as a way of approaching life, so tenaciously attractive to many Christians? What is the difference between pagan and Christian approaches to life?

5. Describe the difference between perceiving God as exercising raw power in the world and recognizing God's power as divine, suffering love.

6. At times, during crises, well-meaning Christian friends misrepresent God as revealed in Jesus Christ. What are some of the “answers” you have heard that are more pagan or misleading than they are Christian?