I’m a Christian and my house just burned down

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**OPINION | Joel Hollier**

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My house just burned down.

There was nothing that anyone could have done to put a halt to the marching wall of flame which devoured so much of the street in which I grew up. The tireless devotion of the ‘firies’ and the unwavering dedication of a legion of volunteers was simply no match for the onslaught which took so many of us off guard and has shaken the very fabric of our community. Beneath the darkening, ash laden skies, my faithful home filled with all of its treasures breathed one last sigh and resigned itself to the flames. Tonight, the interwoven stories of our community are alarmingly coming together with one accord as the fires rage on and the reality of loss becomes an all too familiar motif. Many a tear will be wept before this darkness has passed and no doubt with each tear will come the resounding question ‘Why?’

During times of disaster, when a piece of positive news is heard- for example a property was spared- a Christian will often automatically (and rightly so) exclaim that God is good…But, had that property been taken in the blaze, would that in some way render God ‘less good’?

Over the past 72 hours I have been forced to come to terms with the immensity of what it means to lose one’s home. Standing in the smouldering rubble of violently twisted metal and blackened walls which only the other day provided such unappreciated security is a sobering reality check, the likes of which one never imagines would happen to them. The barrage of well-meaning pop grief psychology is a constant reminder that what we have lost is just stuff- my canon camera is replaceable, as are the library and laptops. But no amount of reassurance can disguise the fact that that house was full of ‘stuff’ that I loved. Dearly. Childish attempts at art; irreplaceable photos of baby faced siblings; scraps of napkins and pebbles- tokens of past summer holidays; walls which my own hands helped build; gifts from friends and family who have since passed away- the list is endless. Yes, I have my memories, but memories are at best fleeting, and sentimentality is a beautiful part of a reality which I know now will fade away even as the smoke dissipates. For those of us waking up each day having lost everything, it is the transience of memories which brings a lump to the throat and leads us to grieve.



Photo of Springwood fires by Eillie Southwood, first posted by the NSW Rural Fire Service on Facebook.

And as though farewelling so much of the past were not enough, the overwhelming task of rebuilding now saps away what little emotional energy we have left. A positive front only goes so far in bouncing from service to service as we gather together the necessities to start afresh, and in all of this I can’t help but recognise that we are the lucky ones- we were insured and are surrounded by a community characterised by love and support. We have dear friends who can’t claim the same.

The trail of destruction has left me, my family and our whole community reeling in shock and asking why on earth such a disaster should occur. Those with a faith in God, myself included are in many ways facing the necessity to question God’s control over events- we prayed that life and property would be spared, but they weren’t- did God not have the strength to calm the flames? Or alternatively, we are forced to question God’s goodness, toying with the possibility that the all powerful creator is at best distantly careless, hearing our prayers but wilfully choosing to let them slip by the wayside. How can I reconcile my loss with an all powerful, all loving father who seeks the best for his people? In my experience, the more I ponder this question both theoretically and now more so in practice, the more I am forced to stand in awe of the sheer magnitude of God. The more I study the life, teachings and work of Jesus, the more I am blown away by just how relevant he is to me today in my suffering. You see, if we are working within a framework which asserts that my subjective experiences are the litmus test for God’s power and goodness, then we are bound to be left flailing at the end of a misguided faith journey. If however we are open to a greater possibility, then I believe that the reality of God’s presence in our lives becomes more than just a peripheral figure- it becomes the solid foundation on which everything else in our life is built.

If it is a fundamentally true statement that God is good as the Bible claims, then his goodness is true no matter what my personal circumstances may be. I may be on the brink of losing all, but God is still good.

Let me explain myself further. During times of disaster, when a piece of positive news is heard- for example a property was spared- a Christian will often automatically (and rightly so) exclaim that God is good. However I can’t help now but ponder the implications of this statement. Had that property been taken in the blaze, would that in some way render God ‘less good’? At what stage do we look at suffering and stop proclaiming that ‘God is good’? If our picture of God is confined to that of a glorified philanthropist who rains good gifts down on his creation, then we run the risk of boxing God in to fit the conception that my comfort is in some way directly proportionate to God’s goodness. While ever the sun shines, we can faithfully say that God is good. But when things take a turn for the worse and the storm clouds are mustering, what happens with our God then? I am more convinced than ever that at the point of scraping the barrel of divine compliments (‘I managed to save my photos, therefore God is good’) we run the risk of watering down our faith, paying pious lip service and potentially little more. No, I believe that God’s goodness runs far deeper than that. If it is a fundamentally true statement that God is good as the Bible claims, then his goodness is true no matter what my personal circumstances may be. I may be on the brink of losing all, but God is still good.

What then of God’s power? Why would a good God allow me to go through these past few days if he could have stopped it by a simple command? During his time on earth Jesus demonstrated his power over the forces of nature time after time, calming a raging storm; walking on water; feeding thousands with just a small meal and ultimately defeating death in his resurrection. These ‘miracles’ were attested to by dumbfounded masses, many of who would later give their lives for their adherence to this man’s teachings. In reality power seems to be the least of God’s worries. If it is true that God designed this world, then it is true that God can control it.

Last night I was reminded of Jesus’ agony as he wept in the garden before his horrific crucifixion. Abandoned by everyone he held dear, the son of God himself was about to taste the bitter cup of suffering and begged that what was to come might pass him by. Jesus did not question his father’s goodness, nor did he question his father’s power. Indeed at this point, nothing about God was in question. Rather, there was a complete recognition that this was all part of the plan.

And so this is where my mind comes to rest- not so much at questions of goodness or of power, but at questions of plan and of purpose. If God does not exist or if he is a distant deity unconcerned with the world of people, then the events of the past couple of days are nothing less and nothing more than a simple tragedy. If on the other hand there is a divine plan and purpose behind all that we see, then the invitation is opened to us to also take on a greater perspective which recognises both God’s sovereignty over all things and the great plan he has for his creation. It is in this perspective that I have come to find the peace and hope that transcends the parochial materialism that characterises our culture and have been drawn into a deepened understanding of who God is.

This understanding colours everything that I see in my own self and in those around me, particularly in two ways over the past 72 hours. Already, after such a short time, my family and I have been overwhelmed by the generosity shown by friends, family and complete strangers. We have been offered hospitality as I have never experienced in my life and in this instance I have been both saddened and energised to realise that as a society, we need moments of loss in order to extract the true humanity which is hidden beneath a veneer of individualism and materialism. The character of God’s generosity is seen so clearly in those created in his image when true need arises, giving them the increasingly rare opportunity to throw off the shackles of a consumer driven society to selflessly consider those around them. Is this not how God asks us to live always? I now see in this tragedy not simply property lost, but more so humanity found as people live out their inbuilt desire to care for the other. Please see this with me and give thanks to God for the opportunity to partake in his good gifts.

The second way that I see this mindset shaping me is in my own personal attitudes. As a broken and feeble human, I am constantly facing the temptation to find my identity and purpose in the fleeting cares of this world. Those of us who have lost all of our physical possessions- whether they be cameras or photos, are now left with a gaping identity crisis as the facade of security is wiped away from our eyes and we realise that what we so often thought of as permanent was nothing more than a smoke screen. For me, this has been such a profound experience as I have come to understand more what Jesus said when gave us the loving command to store up treasures in Heaven where moth and rust cannot destroy and where fire has no power. When our treasures are safely hidden away in eternity then what grasp can the fleeting distractions of this world have on us? Instead we will be free to live life as we are designed to- in deep, authentic relationships with the people around us, acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God.

There was nothing that anyone could have done to put a halt to the marching wall of flame which devoured so much of the street in which I grew up. But right now, with my Bible open beside me and my thoughts on the things of God, I am not bitter nor do I feel overwhelmed by the loss behind and the task ahead. Rather, I hope and pray that in all of this God’s will might be done and I look forward to the chance to one day look back on these days and see what God’s plan was all along.