

We are about 10 days removed from the tragedy that has gripped our nation and our community. 16 families have now begun the journey of life without a loved one that suddenly passed away. Many of you have some sort of connection to one or more of the families from our community or you know someone connected to them. It has been tremendous to see people coming together in the wake of this. The vigils and memorials, the Sticks Out; Ribbons; Jerseys; Financial Support, Cards, Messages, Flowers and prayers all help through this initial shock.

But when the services are over and the world has moved on, each family and person must continue to live in the light of this crushing loss. Then the questions and processing can begin in earnest. Questions will come three weeks from now, three months from now, 3 years from now and maybe for the rest of life.

How can these families cope amidst this crushing hardship? But these families are not the only ones bearing such difficulties. Crushing hardships hit people all the time. It can be the sudden loss of a loved one or the expected loss of a loved one. Yet when it happens it shocks us. Crushing hardship can come in losing a business or closing a business or office; the loss of a job; multiple deaths in a family throughout the year; serious illness with no end in sight; breakup of a family; serious issues with a child or in a marriage. Crushing hardships hit people through earthquakes, war, famines, tsunamis and terrorist attacks.

When such hardships come to our nation, community and families how can we cope and help others do the same? That is what we are going to talk about today. I considered suspending the Revelation series for this message. But the passage in Revelation that I prepared for this week actually brings up many points I would make during such a time as this. So we are going to continue with the next chapter of Revelation from where we left off last week. At first glance, it will look like it has nothing to do with persevering during times of crushing hardship. But it brings perspective about realities in our world and about God. Which can greatly help us or help others.

So our text today is Revelation 9. You can find that in your Bible's now as we get ready to mine its treasures.

If you're following along on the back of your program we will start with number 1. An important step in coping with hardship and a tragedy like this is to recognize **we live in a fallen world**. Sometimes we can live for extended periods of time as if we don't live in a fallen world. Our lives go well. Our jobs or schooling fulfills us. We enjoy good relationships and health. We have fun and celebrate. The weather cooperates and we experience much blessing. We can begin to

believe that all is well in the world. There is certainly much blessing and beauty to experience in our world. But something like the Humboldt tragedy reminds us of the fallen world. Tragedy, sickness, despair, corruption and war are part of life on this planet at this time. The scope of last weekend's tragedy shines the light on this reality more clearly. Imagine if only 1 person died in that accident – say the bus driver from Carrot River. There would likely be less media coverage, less response and less impact. After all, people die in car accidents every day in Canada. This fallen world is on display every day. Yet we can ignore it or forget about it. But something like last week makes it impossible to ignore. We are starkly confronted with this whether or not we want to face it. We know some of these people.

Revelation has reminded us of this fallen reality throughout. We have seen the persecution of believers, the corruption of leadership, the worship of idols and their temples called Satan's throne and the works of Jezebel and the Nicolaitans that Jesus warned the 7 churches against.

The fallenness of our world has several components. Sin is a major one. It came into us and this world through Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. All of humanity was stained with a sinful nature and we have suffered ever since. This sin resulted in a curse upon the earth. So Romans 8:19-21 state "The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly but because of him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption or decay." Then there are the spiritual forces of evil. Ephesians 6:12 describes them – "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." These spiritual forces of evil live under the reign of the devil. He leads these forces. Several times in Scripture we see the devil having some sort of power or authority in the world. Jesus refers to him as the ruler of the world in John 12:31. Paul calls him the prince of the power of the air in Ephesians 2:2. In 2nd Corinthians 4:4, Paul calls him the god of this world. So Satan, the chief fallen angel has some authority in this fallen world.

So let's put this all together – the sinfulness of all humanity that leads to death, the decaying and cursed world, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms, the devil who is a father of lies and a murderer, it partially explains events like last Friday's accident. It's part of living in a fallen world.

Now how does Revelation 9 speak to this? Satan rules the spiritual forces of evil. He is a fallen angel. But he's not the only fallen angel. The gospels reveal clearly the ongoing antagonism of demons against people and the work of God.

They afflict people. The Gospels describe the activities of demons. They oppose God's work. Revelation 9 paints one of the clearest pictures of the reality of demons in the Bible. I will start in 8:13.

Revelation 8:13-9:21 (ESV)

¹³ Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!"

⁹ And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. ² He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. ³ Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. ⁴ They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵ They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. ⁶ And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.

⁷ In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, ⁸ their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; ⁹ they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. ¹⁰ They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. ¹¹ They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.

¹² The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

¹³ Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, ¹⁴ saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." ¹⁵ So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. ¹⁶ The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. ¹⁷ And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. ¹⁸ By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. ¹⁹ For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.

²⁰ The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, ²¹ nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

If you want to see what the spiritual forces of evil look like, go to Revelation 9. I believe both of these groups – the locusts and the army of mounted soldiers are demonic hordes or humans provoked by demonic hordes. John tells us in

in verse 1 that a star, likely an angel, falls from heaven to earth. We are not told whether this is a good angel or an evil one. But he receives a key to open the shaft of the bottomless pit. This pit receives several mentions throughout Scripture. It is called bottomless or fathomless because the ancients thought a world existed under everything in the earth. So they believed in a huge underworld where these evil beings lived. Yet they could only enter the world of the living through the shaft going up to the earth.

Somehow it is locked. But with this key, the angel unlocks the opening. Smoke billows out that darkens the sun and the air. But the rising smoke is soon replaced by something much more ominous. Locust like creatures come out of the smoke determined to wreak havoc. John tells us they were given power like scorpions. Now real scorpions are relatively small creatures but they have power because of their sting. People and other animals avoid scorpions because of the potential pain.

The locusts receive sting power to torment those who do not have God's seal. Their torment is so intense that people wish to die. But death flees from them. Then John describes what they look like.

They wear crowns of gold with human faces and long women's hair. They have fierce teeth like a lion and a tail with a scorpion sting. These demons are powerful, fast, intelligent, fierce and capable of inflicting intense mental and spiritual torment. They also have a king – called Abbadon or destroyer – another name for Satan. Though these particular demons are not released until the angel is given the key, they give us a picture of one demonic horde.

Then in the sixth trumpet we see another massive group that goes out to destroy. The sixth angel releases four evil angels. They receive permission to kill a third of humanity. Somehow they raise a mounted demonic army or human army of 200 million. They look threatening, fierce and grotesque. Somehow the horse like creatures have lion's heads and a tail with a snake's head on the end. From their mouths come fire, smoke and sulfur or brimstone. So here you literally have fire and brimstone.

Revelation 9 portrays the forces of evil in all their grotesqueness and fallenness. We see torment, stinging, threats, and death. We see the reality of the spiritual forces of evil. This reality forms part of the picture of our fallen world. But we are not left to the mercy of our fallen world. Aren't you thankful that Revelation 9 is not the end of the Bible? Yet even in Revelation 9, we can find hope.

The next step in our journey of coping with crushing hardship is to recognize **God still reigns over evil and over tragic situations.** The tragedy of last weekend did not catch God by surprise. It was not something that happened while He wasn't looking or fell asleep in the throne. Though it grieved Him deeply and He sorrows with all those who have lost loved ones, He still reigns. He is still accomplishing His purposes. He has not lost control.

In Revelation though we see fearsome spiritual forces of evil, God still reigns over them. Look at the multiple ways God rules over the demons in this passage. First, the locust army was actually locked into the bottomless pit. They could not come out until God had gave the key. Then they receive strict instructions in verse 4. They cannot harm green grass, trees or any living vegetation. This is ironic because that's what locusts normally attack. But they cannot touch it. Nor can they harm those who have received the seal of God on their foreheads. So in some way, God protects His people from the worst of the demonic assaults.

Though they are allowed to torment, their time is limited to 5 months. This could be because of the 5 month life span of some locusts. But 5 could also symbolize small or limitation. When Jesus fed the 5000, the little boy's lunch had 5 loaves indicating its smallness. Though these locust demons do inflict torment, they have less than half a year to do it.

God's rule over evil is also apparent in the sixth trumpet. The angel holding the trumpet is commanded to release four angels. They cannot carry out their evil deeds until God allows it. He so governs them that He knew the exact hour, day, month and year when this would take place. The four angels raise up a demonic horde or human war that goes out to destroy. But notice even this army is restrained. They cannot kill all the world's population. They are limited to a third. So though there is evil and demonic work going on in the world, God restrains it. God places limits on it. God actively protects His people. So we live in a fallen world. Yet God still reigns.

God can use evil and tragedy to accomplish His greater, good and sovereign purposes. We have seen that in multiple ways already through the Humboldt tragedy. The message given by the Humboldt Broncos chaplain was heard by thousands and perhaps millions last Sunday evening. As of Friday, one upload on Youtube had been viewed 20000 times. So because of this tragedy, 20000 more people have heard the Gospel and the hope that can be found in Christ. We have heard about the head coach's Christianity and his deep desire to have his players hear about Jesus. The interview with his wife on Facebook reveals clearly their faith and her confidence that she will see him again in eternity. Hope in God was unashamedly on display for all to see. God can bring good out of tragedy.

Even in Revelation 9, God accomplishes His greater and good purposes. What is happening in Revelation 9? The oppressors and the unrepentant receive judgment. God uses evil demonic hordes to bring judgment upon evil. God also demonstrates His justice in carrying out this judgment. By revealing the hardness of peoples' hearts comes out in verses 20 and 21. They do not repent of the works of their hands in the making of idols. They do not give up worshipping demons despite God's demonstration of what life under a demonic horde would look like. They do not repent of their murders or sorceries or sexual immorality or thefts. They continue in their hardness of heart. So God reveals the hearts of people when they are under such stress and judgment. The charge that God unfairly judged them can be dismissed based on their response.

Yet God offers warning, hope and salvation even in the midst of crushing hardship. Revelation is a glorious yet tough book. There are hard truths to be found here. Yet, God's warnings serve as a function of his love. God warns through the sending of the eagle in 8:13. After the first four trumpets, the people of the world could conclude that these terrible plagues were just a bad bunch of storms that happened to occur together. But this eagle rises to the middle point of the air and announces there are great woes to come. Judgment cannot be avoided. So people must heed.

And God gave John these visions 2000 years ago. God commanded John to write them down. God preserved them in the last pages of the Bible so that we could have this warning before it's too late. God sent Christ to pay for our sins and enable reconciliation with God. Then we can walk with God as our shepherd throughout life and eternity. We get to know God and His trustworthiness. We begin to settle and entrust the souls of those who have died to God because He is trustworthy. So even in the midst of something terrible like Revelation 9 or the harsh realities of our lives, God is there. God cares and God offers hope and salvation.

Therefore bring to God your own pain and struggles in times of crushing hardship. If you already know Christ, you need to come to Him again with your crushing hardships or trials or impossible situations or your pain. Our compassionate, loving, god will meet you and walk with you and bring brothers and sisters to you.

If you have never come to God in this way, here is what you need to do. First, you must acknowledge that God exists. Then you need to admit that you lived as if He didn't exist. Then you need to stop trusting yourself or something else to provide salvation from this fallen world and fallen living.

Instead put the full trust of your life onto Jesus Christ. You don't trust yourself to do enough good deeds to make you worthy before God. You don't trust yourself to be smart enough to argue your way into heaven. You throw yourself upon Jesus completely like a shipwrecked passenger floating in the water throws themselves onto one of those circular life preservers from a rescue boat.

You say or pray "God – I need you desperately. I turn away from old life apart from you. I put my trust on you for salvation from my sin and a new eternal relationship with you." He will forgive your sin and adopt you into His family and walk with you into eternity. When you have brought your pain and struggles to God and found your hope in Him,

Then bring God to those around you struggling with the pain of crushing hardship. The gift of God and the salvation, hope and life He brings is not something to hoard. We share it to give hope to others living in our fallen world.

But does this really work? Does It help to cling to God in times of crushing hardship? I have not suffered a loss like these families have. So I thought I would conclude with a testimony of someone who has. Remember Roger and Bonita Bott whose 3 girls were killed in a farming accident two and a half years ago? They were interviewed near the second anniversary to this tragedy this past October.

It began as a beautiful, joyous day – bringing in that first, vital crop of canola, back on Oct. 13, 2015.

It would end in a dreadful tragedy that shook the central Alberta farming community to its core, claiming the lives of three young sisters.

For a typical farming family, such as the Botts, harvest time is exciting for everyone, and sisters Catie, 13, and 11-year-old twins Dara and Jana, were no exception.

So when their dad, Roger Bott, returned from the family with a full load of canola – the first cash crop of the season, as farmers call it – they could hardly wait to watch the grain flowing out of the trailer.

The three girls climbed onto the back of the vehicle to watch the canola drain down out of the second of the two, fully filled compartments into the auger beneath. Once it was almost empty of grain, they climbed down a ladder to help clean out the corners, a task they loved to do.

What happened next will never be known for sure, but it changed that day of fun and celebration into one of horror.

"I was going to move to the first compartment, which was still full of grain, so I said, 'Stay out of the canola.' It was the last thing I ever said to them," said Roger Bott.

"After that we don't know what happened. I was taking some samples out of the bottom and saw it wasn't flowing full speed — something was plugged off – so I climbed up into the truck and saw my oldest, Catie, was already going down and the other two were in it, but not yet buried. But I couldn't get them out.

"I shut it down, but they kept sinking. Whatever the pull was I couldn't get them out. At that point, I opened the bottom completely to empty it right out so I could get them, but we weren't fast enough."

Roger and his wife Bonita worked to save their daughters, but to no avail and, as emergency crews arrived, the couple faced the dreadful truth.

“I’m sitting leaning up against the grain trailer and you are just numb at that point. I’m the one who pulled the girls out of the bottom of the trailer and we are exhausted and numb with what we went through.

“At that moment, my wife came up to me, grabbed me by the shirt collar — she is a mess, she has been doing CPR and she has blood on her face and we both knew — and she says: ‘I don’t blame you. I love you and we will get through this together, somehow.’ Then she shook my shoulder and we nodded.”

How the couple and their surviving son Caleb, who was nine years old at the time, managed to carry on rested on their strong Christian faith.

“In a lot of ways, we have accepted what happened, but only because of our faith in God have we been able to do that,” added the father.

“We believe, when we pass on, we are going to be with Jesus forever. Because we knew our kids believed the same thing, that they had made those decisions, then they are with Jesus now. So one of the things that makes it easier for us is that we believe we are going to see our kids again.”

His wife echoes that strong belief.

“We are OK and we will be OK knowing that the girls are with Him in heaven, so that hope for salvation is a great comfort to us as well. If we didn’t have that, I don’t know if we could have survived,” she said.

“We have to go through the rest of our lives without them, but knowing that it is not forever.”

They often speak about their daughters with son Caleb, whom his dad describes as “an unbelievable kid.” He misses his sisters, especially his best friend Dara, but still loves life on the farm.

“We talk about them and think about them a lot, but he is pretty strong,” said his dad. “He pours life into whatever he chooses to do.”

The choice to hold strong to their faith amidst such tragedy reinforced the couple’s belief.

“I am 49 now and I have been a Christian most of my life,” said Roger. “It doesn’t mean I have been perfect and lived as a Christian my whole life, but I asked Jesus to be in my heart a long time ago.

“When the accident happened, we felt like we didn’t have a choice but to trust in God. When faced with something that puts your faith to the test, what is the option? I have followed God for decades, so am I going to take everything I’ve believed in for that many years and throw it out the window at one moment, or am I going to believe it when times are not good?”

“If we turn our back on what we have learned, then how strong was our faith in the first place? It doesn’t end when something like this happens. God is still with us. We can still lean on Him.”

(Calgary Herald, October 6, 2017, Chris Nelson)