

CHAPTER 5

WHY DO ACCIDENTS HAPPEN?

*what about sickness and death?
...and how about healing and life!*

5. WHY DO ACCIDENTS HAPPEN?

Before reading this chapter, how would you answer the question, Why do accidents happen?

A tragic accident

Isadora Duncan's troubled life came to a dramatic end on the 14th of September, 1927, when she was strangled by her own shawl. As she set out for an evening drive in Nice in a red Bugatti sports car, the fringe of the shawl was, unknown to her, dangling in the spokes of the rear wheel beside her. "Adieu mes amis, Je vais à la gloire!" (Goodbye, my friends, I am off to glory!) she called to her friends watching her go—and the first turn of the wheels broke her neck. At forty-nine, it was the end of a tragic life.¹

Accidents, assuming we survive them, can have a huge impact on our lives. They can be very difficult to come to terms with, especially if we were expecting God to protect us. God is righteous and fair, yet accidents are so utterly unfair and arbitrary. An error of judgment made in one second can affect us for the rest of our lives. Why does God allow accidents to happen? Could He not have created a world in which there were no such things as accidents?

What is an accident?

As we begin to look at the subject of accidents, two problems will immediately confront us. Firstly, we need to define what we mean by the word accident, as it can mean different things to different people. Secondly, it can be difficult to identify when an event is truly an accident. Some 'accidents' can almost be predicted.

The word accident, loosely speaking, can be used in two slightly different ways. It can mean something that happens unexpectedly, and it can also mean something that was unintentional.²

Some people argue theologically that God has planned all things to come to pass, therefore, nothing can take Him by surprise, and therefore, there are no such things as accidents (see for example Acts 2:23; Romans 9:15–21; Ephesians 1:4, 5, 11). In this chapter, we will be using the word accident in its alternative sense to mean those negative situations when something unintentional happens. An example of what we mean is where a mother of a baby acci-

dentally kills it because she puts too many covers on it one night (1 Kings 3:19). We would call this an accident because the tragic outcome was unintended.

In our study, we need to distinguish between ‘accidents’ where we know God, the devil or any spiritual being is responsible, and true accidents, where no one at all is to blame.

Two reasons why accidents happen

There are two basic reasons why accidents happen. Firstly, as we have stated before, God has deliberately made us mortal, with limited strength, so therefore we can get hurt. (We looked at this point briefly in chapter three.) The second reason is that we have limited knowledge and wisdom. If we had perfect knowledge and wisdom, we could avoid all accidents; for example, we would not board an aeroplane if we knew it was unsafe to fly.

An accident waiting to happen

On 31 August 1988, in Dallas, Texas, Delta Flight 1141 was serviced and prepared for a flight that would take it to Salt Lake City, Utah. The weather that afternoon, according to the Captain of the flight, was ‘beautiful’. On board the plane, a Boeing 727, were ninety-eight passengers and seven crew. Unfortunately, owing to a series of errors, the fuel was loaded incorrectly giving the plane an uneven weight distribution. Before it started even to taxi, Delta Flight 1141 was an accident waiting to happen. When the plane eventually took off, it immediately rolled out of control and crashed causing fourteen people to die.³

Learning to avoid accidents

Athletes and top sportsmen often incur injuries when they push themselves too far and many people have hurt themselves by attempting to lift something too heavy for them. People sometimes misjudge the weather when climbing mountains and so suffer from

exposure, and perhaps many of us will experience sunburn at some time or another.

As we mature we should learn what our limitations are and how to keep within them. Young children often bump into things, hurting themselves, until they learn to be more careful. They learn things the hard way. A wise parent will keep scissors and knives and other potentially dangerous objects away from their children until they are older.

Proverbs 22:3 The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty. (NIV)

The possibility of accidents will decrease as we mature and become wiser but then increase when we get old and frail.

Preventable accidents

Many accidents are preventable. If we recognised the danger and took sufficient precaution beforehand, we would avoid being hurt. Hopefully we do this many times a day without thinking. We are blameworthy if we knew (or should have known) the danger and did not take appropriate action. The Bible shows we have a responsibility not to be careless.

Deuteronomy 22:8 “When you build a new house, then you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring guilt of bloodshed on your household if anyone falls from it . . .” (NKJV)

This instruction was given to the Jews as they began to occupy Israel, and the purpose of the parapets was to prevent people from accidentally falling off their roofs. It teaches us that householders have a responsibility to think about the safety of others. This duty of care does not preclude anyone from exercising their own responsibility. If someone had too much to drink and climbed on top of the parapet and then fell off the roof, the blame for the accident would be on them, for they had acted irresponsibly.

Another example where responsibility is taught is in the instruction given to owners of dangerous animals (Exodus 21:28–29).

Balancing accident prevention with risk taking

Although responsibility is important, we should not be preoccupied with trying to prevent accidents. Countries which always seek to apportion blame to accidents will discourage adventure and initiative and instead encourage caution and passivity. This can hold people back from achieving their potential. As individuals we will have differing views in this area.

Evel Knievel, the famous American motorcycle daredevil, suffered nearly forty broken bones before he died in 2007. He spent his last years connected twenty-four hours a day to a drip pumping powerful painkillers into a spine that had been fused by hundreds of jarring motorcycle jumps. He was best known for a failed attempt to jump Snake River Canyon on a rocket-powered cycle.⁴ His view on life was clearly biased towards risk taking than accident prevention.

Being arrogant and overconfident

If we have a tendency to be arrogant and overconfident in our own abilities, we will at times be unprepared for the danger we face and more likely to suffer accidents. Children are not so aware of danger as adults and cannot therefore be held as accountable and should not be given responsibility until they are old enough to handle it. In our own lives, we might need to think again about taking on unacceptable risks for trivial reasons—such as partaking in extreme sports or stunts and dares. Alternatively, we might need to take on more responsibility and trust God to help us.

Road traffic accidents are a particular concern in many countries. Approximately 1.1 million people die each year on the world's roads.⁵ Motorists do not always appreciate the risks they take when they drive. A responsible car driver allows for errors of judgment in their own driving as well as that of others. They accept their concen-

tration, anticipation, and driving skills are not perfect. If we are in a hurry, we can momentarily forget our sense of responsibility and perform manoeuvres we would not normally take. This applies especially if we have a tendency to get impatient. For many of us, the weight of responsibility only comes on us after we have experienced an accident.

Accidents when undertaking medical treatment

Another important area for us to consider are deaths and injuries resulting from mistakes while undertaking medical treatment. In the USA, which spends more on health per person than any other country, it is estimated that one in seven hospitalised Medicare beneficiaries experiences harm (such as infection associated with the use of a catheter) as a result of their care, and approximately one in sixty-five people will die from their treatment.⁶

All too often we are unappreciative of the risks when doctors prescribe medicine and when surgeons operate on their patients. The human body is very complicated—too complicated for us to fully understand with our limited intellects. Doctors have to work within their limited knowledge while anaesthetists have to be very careful in supplying the correct mix of gases to their patients. It can be fatal if a surgeon makes even a small error of judgment when putting a scalpel into the patient. As a disease progresses, the treatment becomes harder and the risk of error increases. We need to accept that surgeons are only human, so if we trust in them to operate on our bodies, we take on a risk that the outcome may not be successful. It is important to think deeply about the risks before we undertake such treatments. If the risks are not fully accepted, a failed operation might be a big disappointment for us, and we could end up blaming the hospital staff for an understandable error. We may also feel let down by God.

Taking blame for an accident

The fact that we are involved in an accident does not automatically imply we are blameworthy. The nurse who dropped a child while running for safety could not be blamed for harming him (2 Samuel 4:4). Some accidents are so unpredictable we could not plan for them and take preventative action.

Can God or the devil be blamed for causing accidents?

Some accidents appear too much of a coincidence and if we investigate them further, we may find a cause behind them. Sometimes events are so unusual that we would never consider them to be accidents even though at face value they appear to be so.

Jonah was swallowed by a great fish and he was inside it for three days and three nights. It is inconceivable this could happen by chance, and indeed we are told that God planned this to happen in advance (Jonah 1:17).

Likewise, Job was hit with four catastrophes in one day (Job 1:13–19). One of these was a windstorm which killed all his children. From his point of view, clearly something was happening in the background. It was only later on that he understood God had given Satan permission to afflict him.

Paul was shipwrecked three times (2 Corinthians 11:25). One shipwreck could be considered an accident, but three suggest something more involved was going on. It is more likely that Satan was trying to kill Paul to stop the gospel from being spread.

Seeking God's protection from danger

Psalm 91:9–12 If you say, 'The LORD is my refuge,' and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will

lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. (NIV)

If we follow after God and do what pleases Him, we can rely on His protection. However, because this offer of protection is dependent on our being in a good relationship with God, then it is right for us to spend an appropriate time with Him seeking His guidance and protection before undertaking tasks with high levels of risk or danger.

Ezra 8:21–23 Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, “The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him.” So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer. (NKJV)

God knows all things (Proverbs 15:3) and He can warn us of things to come (Acts 11:27–29; 21:10–11), but sometimes we need to be in a position where we can hear Him to enjoy His protection.

Can God be blamed for allowing us to suffer accidents?

The very fact God allows accidents to happen implies, in a sense, we can hold Him responsible for all accidents. However, if He did remove the possibility of accidents, He would take away our freedom to do what we want. Given the choice, we would want to retain our freedom.

God offers to protect us from accidents, including trivial ones such as stumbling on a stone (Psalm 91:12). However, if we do not serve Him or have a right relationship with Him, there is no obligation on His part to protect us. Why should a righteous God help us who are unrighteous and will only continue to sin? In our unsaved state He counts us as His enemies (Romans 5:10; James 4:4).

We can only blame God for an accident if He promised us unconditionally that He would protect us, and this is something He has not done.

Conclusion

In the last few chapters, we have seen that there are many reasons why we get sick and suffer accidents. If God is the cause, there will be a righteous reason (Psalm 119:75; Daniel 9:13–14; Nehemiah 9:30–33).

We will not always know whether there is a reason why we are sick or why we went through an accident, so we should bear in mind the following two principles to help us react in a right way.

Firstly, we should not lightly accuse God or the devil of afflicting us when we are not sure of the facts (Jude 8–10). It is much better to keep silent and to bring our complaint before God.

The second general principle concerns the way we react to suffering. We should submit to God if He is causing us to suffer, but we should resist the devil if he is attacking us. If man is afflicting us in some way, then we should not retaliate in kind (Matthew 5:38–48). It is quite likely we will need to do all these actions simultaneously.

James 4:7 Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. (NKJV)

Questions to consider

1. Is it always possible to distinguish between an accident (where no one is to blame) and a mistake (where someone is to blame)?
 2. How do we know when we are being too optimistic or too cautious concerning accident prevention?
 3. How can we balance our own responsibility to be careful with a trust in God to look after us?
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References:

- 1 Dorling Kindersley, *20th Century Day by Day*, 1999, p357
- 2 See the first two definitions of accident in *Collins English Dictionary*, Third Edition, 1995
- 3 *The Black Box—Cockpit Voice Recorder Accounts of In-Flight Accidents*, Edited by Malcolm Macpherson, Harper Collins 1998
- 4 *The Daily Telegraph*, Saturday, 1 December 2007
- 5 World Health Organization website. See <https://www.who.int/> and search for road traffic injuries. Page last updated 13 December 2023.
- 6 Office of Inspector General, Department of Health and Human Services, USA, *Adverse events in Hospitals: National Incidence Among Medicare Beneficiaries*, November 2010.

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