

Semantic satiation is the phenomenon in which a word or phrase is repeated so often it loses its meaning. It is a word or phrase that used to sound meaningful but through overuse it now sounds meaningless, maybe even ridiculous.

Let me give you a modern example of a phrase that some think has reached semantic satiation: *Thoughts and prayers*.

You've all heard the phrase. I did a little bit of research, from what I was able to find the phrase came into vogue after the Columbine High School Shooting in 1999. For years it has been the go-to phrase after tragedy. For years news anchors, politicians, and social media junkies have been sending *thoughts and prayers* to those affected by tragedies from mass shootings to hurricanes.

But in recent years the phrase has reached semantic satiation. It has been repeated so often that it has gone from meaningful to ridiculous.

Maybe you've seen the memes: A garbage truck with "thoughts and prayers" on its side unloading its content at the dump; an empty shipping container proclaiming "Excellent news: the first shipment of your thoughts and prayers has just arrived"; the guy sitting comfortably in his living room with a cup of coffee and a laptop, "Sending thoughts and prayers. There... all better."

After years of hearing it after almost every tragedy, a lot of people are sick of hearing about thoughts and prayers. So now a Politician offering thoughts and prayers can expect to be called out for it, people want activism, policy changes, not thoughts and prayers.

What do you think? How do you feel about *thoughts and prayers* as a response to tragedy?

I think it is an interesting thing to think about. It revolves around a reality of life that we all need to deal with: what is the proper way to respond to the mess that sin has made of this world?

Biblically speaking, that is where it all comes from, right? Mass shootings, hurricanes, car crashes like the one that took the life of a Franklin teen this last week, cancer like the one that took the life of our sister Judi Lauber one week ago – all tragedy is a byproduct of sin – sometimes tragedy is a byproduct of the sinful choices of others (like mass shooters or drunk drivers) often tragedy is a byproduct of sin in general. The Bible says that because of sin the whole creation groaning as in the pains of childbirth.

In a world ruined by sin it is a question we all have to wrestle with: what is the proper response to tragedy, to the mess that sin has made of this world? It is a question that even unbelievers have to wrestle with – and the current debate over *thoughts and prayers* is proof of that.

So, how should we respond? As Christians, the most important question is: how would God have us respond?

Jesus helps us answer that question today.

In Luke 7 Jesus is confronted with tragedy – the wages of sin. He's walking into a town called Nain and he runs into a funeral procession. All funerals are sad, but this is a particularly heartbreaking one: A mother burying her son – feeling all of that crushing frustration of a mother outliving her child. On top of that we are told it was her *only* son and she was a widow. She was a woman who knew what it felt like to be surrounded by people grieving with her, but still feeling utterly alone – she lost her husband and now she had lost her only son.

A tragedy – a tragedy that sounds heartbreakingly familiar.

The question: how does Jesus respond? In answering that question we find not only instruction on how we can respond to the tragedy of others, but incredible comfort in our own tragic lives – because we too live in the veil of tears, in the valley of the shadow of death.

Are you ready to learn from the master? How to respond to tragedy:

Part one of Jesus' response to tragedy: **When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."**

His heart went out to her. The word Luke uses here is literally, his guts were moved. He saw her pain and he physically felt it with her. He saw her suffering and he felt sick to the stomach. He looked at this unnamed woman, at her dead son, at her pain, and he knew this is not how he created the world to be, and his heart broke with her and for her.

His heart went out to her and then he said some words that may have seemed very challenging in the moment, **"Don't cry."** We know how the story ends, though, so we know why he said those words. But part one: thoughts... sympathy would be the word we use, a combination of two Greek words (pathos and sym) which mean "feel" and "together", the ability to feel with them, to feel what they feel, to have your heart broken when you see the heartbroken.

Part two of Jesus' response to tragedy: **Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still.**

To us this seems like a relatively unimportant part of the story, but I doubt that this grieving woman felt the same. To Jewish culture at the time of Jesus this seemingly simple act was actually a rather extraordinary act. You see, coming this close and actually touching the bier with a dead body made Jesus ceremonially unclean. In Number 5 God had said to his people through Moses, **"Command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who is ceremonially unclean through contact with a dead body. Send away male and female alike; send them outside the camp so they will not defile their camp, where I dwell with them."**

It may seem relatively unimportant to us in our culture, but to this woman, this woman who was burying her only son, whose husband was dead, who felt so very alone, Jesus touched that bier and she was no longer alone in the unclean suffering of death.

Part two of Jesus' response: concretely loving action for those suffering. He didn't just stand back and send his thoughts and prayers as the procession walked past him. Jesus reached out and he touched. He joined that woman in her suffering. Emotionally,

culturally, physically he was there with her in her tragedy. His culturally extraordinary act sent the message that this widow didn't have to go through this alone because he was going to be there with her, he was going to give her more than just thoughts and prayers.

Part three of Jesus' response to tragedy: **He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.**

When confronted with tragedy Jesus didn't just send thoughts and prayers, he didn't just concretely act in love to alleviate the suffering, he fixed the problem as only he can. The same God who spoke this world into existence spoke life into that dead body. The one whose heart went out to her, who grieved with her, who reached out and joined her in her suffering, fixed her suffering. He joined her in heartbreak so he could heal her heart.

This is Jesus' response to tragedy. His heart breaks. He acts in concrete love for those suffering. He fixes the problem.

And in this response is education and comfort.

Education...

When tragedy strikes out there, to someone else, take a page from Jesus' book.

No matter what the rest of the world thinks, thoughts and prayers are still a very important biblical response – to see suffering and to love those people enough to have your heart break with theirs, to love them enough to think about what they must be going through and to love them enough to bring them in prayer to the throne of God – this is the first part of a Christian response to tragedy.

But don't stop there. The many lonely, hurting people of this world need to feel loved. And we, who know the love of Jesus, should be the first to offer it to them. Thoughts of love and prayers of love need to be expressed in acts of love for those who are suffering – seemingly small things like touching a bier, giving a hug to someone in pain, sitting for an hour with someone cooped up in hospital, or giving a gift card who has suffered loss, little concrete acts of love like that can make a huge difference – this is the second part of the Christian response to tragedy.

Realize how important this second part is. Jesus probably isn't going to come strolling into Franklin the way he did at Nain. He won't physically be there to reach out and touch the hurting people of our church and our community with his love, but he would have them know his love through us, his church. This is a big deal, people wonder where is God when I'm suffering. God doesn't want them to suffer alone. He would have you be there as his representative to love them in their suffering.

But don't stop there either. Thoughts and prayers, acts of love are important, but most important of all: those whose hearts are broken need a solution. As far as I know none of us here can tell dead people to get up, but we can point them to our Jesus – the Jesus who lived for us and died for us and rose again so that we could know his permanent solution for those living in the valley of the shadow of death. This is the third part – pointing people to Jesus. Tragedy, all tragedy, this is why Jesus matters.

This is how God would have you respond to tragedy – sympathy, acts of love, and pointing people to Jesus.

Now let's get to the really good part... the comfort. I've been kind of talking about this in a distant, theoretical kind of way, but tragedy doesn't just happen out there, right? Right here in our lives, in our stories, the tragedy of sin is woven in.

Bottom line comfort: This is why Jesus matters for us too.

For us who live in a world filled with tragedy, Jesus is the only real solution. Jesus doesn't just offer empty shipping containers of thoughts and prayers. Jesus doesn't just take concrete steps to alleviate the suffering of this world, it doesn't just comfort those who mourn, help them put their lives back together, or try to make tragedy less common. Jesus offers all of those things, but he takes it a step further than anyone and anything else in this world can. He offers a real solution.

This same Jesus who changed that widow's life that day in Nain is my Jesus and he is your Jesus.

When you suffer Jesus suffers with you. His heart goes out to you. His heart breaks when your heart is broken.

When you suffer Jesus wants to join you in your suffering. For that widow in Nain he was there to reach out and touch her in her suffering. For us he would join us in our suffering through his body, the church. He would have you find in your brothers and sisters in faith his hands ready to reach out and act in love so that you never have to go through tragedy alone.

And best of all by far, when you suffer Jesus did something to fix the problem. He offers you life, eternal life with him in that place so beautifully described where Jesus' own hands will wipe the tears from your eyes, no more suffering, no more pain, no more death – a real solution: forgiveness and heaven.

This is the Christian response and comfort in suffering:

Thoughts and prayers, yes.

Acts of love, yes.

A real solution, because of Jesus, yes.

Amen.