

The California Wildfires: Paradise Lost, Lives and Much More Gone

The Wired Word for the Week of November 18, 2018

In the News

Last Tuesday started with more bad news about the two major wildfires burning in California.

The Camp fire, in the northern part of the state, and so named after Camp Creek Road, its place of origin, had by Tuesday burned an area the size of Rhode Island, and the death total from that blaze had risen to 42, with the finding of 13 more sets of human remains on Monday. The Camp fire is now the deadliest and most destructive in California's recorded history.

Tuesday also brought bad news about the Woolsey fire in southern California: Fierce Santa Ana winds of 60 to 70 mph were expected to cause the fire to spread beyond the 93,000+ acres it has already consumed. That conflagration started on November 8, the same day as the Camp fire, and is so named for Woolsey Canyon Road, where it started. As of Tuesday, the death toll from that fire was two, bringing to 44 the fire-related deaths in the state. (UPDATE: As of Wednesday, the death toll from the two fires had risen to 50, after search crews found six more fatalities from the Camp fire.)

But as of Tuesday, about 100 people were still unaccounted for, making it possible that the death toll from the fires will rise.

Both fires prompted the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people.

As of Monday night, firefighters had estimated that both fires were about 30 percent contained, and with winds predicted to diminish in the north, the hope was that more progress could be made against the Camp fire. The rising Santa Ana winds in the south, however, predicted more problems fighting the Woolsey blaze.

The fires have touched people across the financial spectrum. Many of the estimated 435 structures burned in the southern fire were higher priced homes, including those of some celebrities. Many of the estimated 7,177 structures destroyed by the northern fire were lower priced homes.

The most damage from the Camp fire is in the community of Paradise, a town of about 26,000 people, many of whom were retirees. That community has been gutted by the fire and most of the deaths occurred there. Some people died in their cars as they tried to escape the flames. Many of those who survived tell of close calls with the rapidly advancing hellscape.

TWW team member Heidi Mann has heard from a longtime friend who with her family lived in Paradise and had to evacuate. "They lost everything but the little they could take with them," Mann said. Her friend told her "it was 'raining fire' as they drove out of town" and also "bone-chilling cold" probably because of the smoke blocking the sun.

According to Paradise's mayor, Jody Jones, about 90 percent of the housing and about 50 percent of the business-service sector of the town is gone, consumed by the fire.

The Big Questions

1. Being forced to evacuate your home without advance warning requires you to make instant decisions about what to take with you. What values and principles should guide you?
2. What *intangible* but nonetheless important things are gone when people lose their homes?
3. Can your Christian faith help you deal with major loss of home and possessions? If so, in what way? If not, why not?
4. What are we implying when we say that something -- or someone -- is "gone"? What are we implying theologically when we make such a statement?
5. While no location is safe from every natural threat, some places are more risky than others. What is your local danger? How have you experienced it? Why do you stay? What is the Christian view of "safety"?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Job 27:18-19

They build their houses like nests, like booths made by sentinels of the vineyard. They go to bed with wealth, but will do so no more; they open their eyes, and it is gone. (For context, read 27:8-23.)

While Job may have been talking about divine judgment, these verses can also be a simple statement about "goneness." There were TV interviews and online videos this week with people whose homes have burned to the ground in one of the California fires. One man, standing in front of a smoldering ruin said to the reporter, "This was my home, but now it is gone."

Goneness is one of the hard facts we have to contend with in this life. No faith and no theology that fails to give us a way to view and face goneness can have any enduring power in our lives.

Questions: What sources of help have enabled you to deal with something or someone being permanently gone? What supposed sources of help did not in fact help you?

Job 2:9-10

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips. (For context, read 2:1-10.)

Matthew 5:45

... so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (For context, read 5:43-48.)

Questions: If God sends blessings of sun and rain on people without regard to their morality, is it reasonable that he allows natural disasters to fall on people without regard to their morality as well? Is there anything that is unreasonable about it?

Is Job's outlook about God's sovereignty, that *all things* -- blessings as well as woes -- come from God's hand reflected in the rest of scripture? What is your view of Job's outlook? How might Job's view help us when we are facing "goneness"?

Isaiah 43:2

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. (For context, read 43:1-7.)

This is one biblical response to goneness. The speaker in this verse is God himself, and he is promising his presence with those who trust in him, even when they are undergoing great suffering, trials or loss, even when they have to metaphorically, "walk through fire." Because God is with them, "the flame shall not consume" them.

Questions: How might God's promise in this verse apply to those who were, in fact, consumed by the flame? Where, in the face of loss, have you been able to apply this verse in your life?

Responding to the News

This is a good time to think about what things you most would not want to lose in time of hurried evacuation from your home, and consider how you might keep those items immediately retrievable. One way to do this thinking is to assume you have three minutes to evacuate your house in the face of an oncoming fire, and that your family and pets are already safely outside. What items would you grab in those three minutes to take with you? Why?

It's common among those who place a high priority on being prepared for disasters to have a "bug-out bag" (or bags) containing necessities and other items they want to take with them in order to survive three or four days should they have to evacuate at a moment's notice. What are some items you would put in your bug-out bag? You might think in terms of necessity, likelihood of need and nice-to-have.

Prayer

O Lord, be with those who have gone through the fire, that despite what is now gone from their lives, they are not consumed. In Jesus' name. Amen.