

Dear Class Member,

May 30-June 1 marks the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, when the Greenwood District in north Tulsa, Oklahoma, better known as Black Wall Street, was reduced to charred rubble in a vicious attack by white supremacists spurred by racial animus, greed, jealousy and rage. Yet many Americans have never heard of what has been called "the worst incident of racial violence in American history." While this event occurred 100 years ago, the fact that it's only recently become widely known qualifies it for headline news today. So for our next class, we explore the question of how we can honestly educate our children about difficult aspects of our history, and the benefits to them of doing so.



Uncovering a Massacre Swept Under the Rug for a Century

The Wired Word for the Week of May 30, 2021

In the News

Last week, three centenarians, Viola Fletcher, her younger brother Hughes Van Ellis, and Lessie Benningfield Randle, testified before a House Judiciary subcommittee of Congress about their experience during the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre that leveled 35 city blocks, killed 75 to 300 people (mostly African-American), and injured more than 800.

On May 31, 1921, Fletcher went to sleep, feeling safe in her home in the Greenwood neighborhood in north Tulsa, Oklahoma. Overnight, her sense of security would be shattered by a mob of violent white men determined to wipe out her community.

She was 7 years old.

"I will never forget the violence of the white mob when we left our home. I still see black men being shot, black bodies lying in the street. I still smell smoke and see fire. I still see black businesses being burned. I still hear airplanes flying overhead. I hear the screams," Fletcher, 107, told the legislators. "I have lived through the massacre every day. Our country may forget this history, but I cannot. I think about the terror inflicted upon black people in this country every day."

Van Ellis, 100, said to survivors of the Tulsa massacre and their descendants, the event is more than "a footnote in the history books," because they "live it every day," keenly aware of what they lost and aching over the future that might have been.

Lessie Benningfield Randall, 106, stated that "My opportunities were taken from me and my community." She says she still has nightmares of the dead bodies she saw piled up that day.

Greenwood residents have sought justice for nearly a century, without satisfaction, according to Van Ellis. "We were made to feel that our struggle was unworthy of justice, that we were less than the whites, that we weren't fully Americans," testified Van Ellis, a World War II veteran. "We were shown that in the United States, not all men were equal under the law. We were shown that when black voices called out for justice, no one cared."

In the early 1900s, Tulsa, Oklahoma, experienced a huge oil boom, drawing a large number of black settlers, who established hundreds of thriving businesses, including banks, realtors, sports and entertainment venues, restaurants, hotels, groceries, jewelers, barber and beauty shops, and clothing stores, in the Greenwood District of north Tulsa. "Black Wall Street," as the prosperous community of 10,000 came to be known, was a hub of black culture that featured a hospital, newspapers, churches, a public library, law offices and a strong school system.

But with bitterness of the Civil War and World War I still in the rearview mirror of the nation, racial tensions simmered just beneath the surface of many communities. Tulsa was no exception.

Sometime in the late afternoon of May 30, 1921, Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old black shoe-shiner, boarded an elevator to get to the only restroom designated for people of his race. What happened next is unclear. Rowland apparently bumped into Sarah Page, the 17-year-old white elevator operator, who screamed. A bystander assumed Page had been assaulted and called police, who arrested Rowland the next day. Rumors raged that Rowland had raped the girl, even though Page denied it and refused to press charges.

But Pandora's box had already been opened. A crowd of armed white men assembled at the jail where Rowland was being held. Afraid that the mob would lynch Rowland if given the chance, about 75 black men from Greenwood, some of whom were armed, came to the jail to offer assistance to the sheriff. The sheriff declined their offer and urged them to go home.

As the men from Greenwood attempted to leave the courthouse, words, and then bullets, were exchanged between them and the white men outside. Then, according to the sheriff, "all hell broke loose." Vastly outnumbered, the black men withdrew to Greenwood, followed by a growing mob of enraged white men, some dressed in KKK robes and hoods, "armed to the teeth," according to one observer.

Using torches on the ground and fire bombs dropped from airplanes, the whites set fire to Greenwood, destroying 191 businesses, several churches, a junior high school, the only hospital in the district and 1,256 homes, leaving about 10,000 homeless. Six thousand black residents were rounded up and interned. Damages amounted to more than \$1.5 million in real estate losses and \$750,000 in lost personal property (equal to \$33 million in 2020).

After the massacre, the charges against Rowland were dismissed.

No one involved in the events of May 30-June 1, 1921, was ever prosecuted, punished or held accountable. Greenwood never regained its former glory, and survivors of the slaughter bore the scars of their trauma for the rest of their lives, passing on the effects to their descendants.

"How do you get past the trauma, the hurt, the pain, the fear, the chaos without truth?" asks Anneliese M. Bruner, a descendant of [Mary E. Jones Parrish](#), one of the Tulsa Massacre survivors. Bruner was unaware of the events of 1921 until her father disclosed the truth to her when she was in her 30s. She suspects shame and fear of retribution kept black survivors quiet for decades.

Whites who had participated in the violence or who had been complicit in subsequent efforts to cover up what happened had their own reasons for wanting to silence witnesses or to rewrite history.

Tulsa attorney Damario Solomon-Simons, the founder of the [Justice for Greenwood Foundation](#), says some descendants of white participants in the massacre "don't want to discuss ... it, because then they're talking about their fathers, their grandfathers, their uncles."

Suits against the city of Tulsa and the state of Oklahoma, filed by victims of the massacre, seeking redress through the courts, have largely been unsuccessful. Most never received any financial help from insurance or government agencies to aid in their recovery.

"Please, do not let me leave this Earth without justice, like all the other massacre survivors," Van Ellis pleaded with congressional representatives last week.

Viola Fletcher testified, "I am 107 years old and I have never ... seen justice. I pray that one day I will."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Tulsa Historical Society and Museum](#)

['Black Wall Street': The History of the Wealthy Black Community and the Massacre Perpetrated There. CNBC](#)

[Tulsa Race Massacre. Wikipedia](#)

[Tulsa's 'Black Wall Street': Before, During and After the Massacre. History.com](#)

[A Century After the Race Massacre, Tulsa Confronts Its Bloody Past. NPR](#)

Applying the News Story

Some of us at *The Wired Word* were asking ourselves why we had never heard about the Tulsa Race Massacre until recently, even though the event took place almost exactly 100 years ago.

For decades, most media outlets and government officials paid little to no attention to what we now know as the Tulsa 1921 Race Massacre. In the first decades after the event, the *Tulsa Tribune* features such as "Fifteen Years Ago Today" or "Twenty-five Years Ago Today" failed to mention it.

On the 50th anniversary of the disaster, the Tulsa chamber of commerce and the two major Tulsa newspapers declined to publish photos and accounts of the attack on Greenwood. As recently as 2017, a history of the Tulsa Fire Department from 1897 until the date of publication failed to include the 1921 massacre during which 35 city blocks went up in flames. Only a year ago, the massacre was finally added to the Oklahoma school curriculum.

Refusing to acknowledge historical events is only part of the problem. How we talk about them is another concern. For example, the events of May 30-June 1, 1921, were initially labeled the Tulsa Race Riot, which may have been partly to relieve insurance companies from the obligation to pay benefits to Greenwood residents adversely affected by the destruction.

The term "riot" also led many to assume that blacks were to blame for trashing their own community.

An Oklahoma commission to investigate the events of May 30-June 1, 1921, authorized by the state legislature in 1996, was originally called the "Tulsa Race Riot Commission," but in 2018, the name was changed to the "Tulsa Race Massacre Commission." And in 2021, the Library of Congress reframed the event as a "massacre" rather than a "riot."

That leads us to consider how we choose to educate our children about difficult subjects. What do we include in and what do we leave out of our curriculums, whether teaching about recent history, or about biblical and church historical events? How do we describe events, and to what purpose? Why does the way we talk about historical and biblical figures and events matter?

The Big Questions

1. What, if anything, did you know about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre before reading this lesson, and when did you learn it? Does anything bother you about your answer? Explain.
2. Why do you think the purging of Greenwood in Tulsa is not well known to many Americans? Was omission of this subject in school curriculums intentional or accidental? If you think it was intentional, why would it have been neglected? What, if anything, does our faith require of us once we learn the facts about some previously neglected aspects of our history?
3. What gaps in your education that you consider significant have you discovered? What do you think may account for such gaps?
4. Why do you think certain topics are not included in curriculums? How does your school district determine its approach to challenging subjects?
5. What role, if any, should the church play in shaping a community's approach to educating its residents?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 22:6

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray. (No context needed.)

The book of Proverbs is largely a collection of instructive sayings from a father to guide his son to live wisely and righteously.

Questions: What, in essence, is "the right way"? Is there only one "right way"? Explain.

What is the difference between these two statements?

Make sure you use proper training methods (techniques, ways).

Make sure you train children (or disciples) to follow the right path, to head in the right direction, to aim for the right goals.

Genesis 4:9-11

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the LORD said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand." (For context, read 4:1-16, 25-26; see also Hebrews 11:4.)

Adam and Eve had two sons. The firstborn, Cain, was a farmer, and Abel was a shepherd. When the men brought offerings to God, God accepted Abel's gift, but was not impressed with Cain's. Why God reacted differently to the two gifts is a discussion for another day. For the limited purposes of this lesson, we want to focus on Cain's furious response. God asked Cain why he was so angry. He assured him that he would be accepted if he did well, but warned Cain that if he wasn't careful, the sin that lurked at the door of his heart would break in and take over his entire life (vv. 6-7).

Rather than taking the role of a student, willing to learn from God and his brother Abel, Cain took the anger he felt toward God out on his brother, killing him (v. 8). The consequences were immediate and severe: No longer would his work as a farmer be blessed (v. 11), nor would he dwell in the presence of the Lord or enjoy the company of his parents any more (v. 16). Cain also brought his parents grief by murdering their son Abel, and by his own exile from their presence (vv. 25-26).

Questions: Imagine for a moment that Cain is a metaphor for the men who wrought death and destruction to Greenwood, and imagine Abel as a metaphor for the victims of the Tulsa massacre. What, if anything, did Cain have in common with the attackers in Tulsa? What, if anything, did Abel have in common with the victims of the massacre?

Why was Cain so angry at God? Was his anger justified? Why or why not? Why were the white men in Tulsa so angry, and were they justified in their anger? Why or why not? What is the relationship between anger at God and violence against people?

How and why did Cain endeavor to hide his crime? Ultimately, why was his effort unsuccessful? What does this tell us about God's awareness of our actions, and of the powerful voices even victims of horrific crimes retain after they die?

Luke 11:47-51

[Jesus said,] "Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation." (For context, read 11:37-52.)

In this passage, Jesus has a few choice words for religious people who made a big deal out of maintaining outward cleanliness and appearing pious, while inwardly they were "full of greed and wickedness" (vv. 37-41), lacking in justice, love (v. 42), and compassion (vv. 45-46).

Then he charges his generation with a particularly vexing charge: building the tombs of prophets killed by their ancestors. Say *what*? What is he talking about? And what does that have to do with us today?

Let's be clear: Jesus is not saying that his generation committed the crimes perpetrated by their ancestors. But his generation bore witness to the crimes of their ancestors, and approved of them. How does Jesus know this? By the fact that his generation continues to act in the same way their ancestors acted (v. 49).

Building tombs for dead prophets is not the best way to honor the dead prophets. It might just be a way to try to ensure that those prophets stay dead and sealed up in a place where they can't speak up and make trouble.

No, the best way to honor dead prophets is to stop killing and persecuting other prophets God sends you!

Otherwise, the current generation of offenders will be liable for all the crimes committed against those who speak God's word, from Abel to Zechariah, the entire alphabet of crimes, from A to Z.

"But that's not fair," we cry. But Jesus is not saying we are accountable for the crimes others committed in the past; we are accountable for harboring the sin in our hearts that lays the groundwork for the same kind of crimes our ancestors committed generations before us.

Questions: Given this text, what do you think Jesus would say to the descendants of those who terrorized and brutalized the residents of Greenwood in 1921? Is his message one of condemnation only, or is there a sliver of hope in the message? If the latter, what is that hope?

Genesis 23:13-15

He said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, "If you only will listen to me! I will give the price of the field; accept it from me, so that I may bury my dead there." Ephron answered Abraham, "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver -- what is that between you and me? Bury your dead." (For context, read 23:1-20.)

Joshua 1:4

[God said,] "From the wilderness and the Lebanon [mountains] as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory." (For context, read 1:1-10.)

When Sarah died, Abraham was living a nomadic lifestyle, so he had no property where he could bury her. Therefore, he offered to buy a piece of Hittite land at Mamre, where many years earlier, God had appeared to him and had promised to give him a son by his wife Sarah (Genesis 18:1, 10). Ephron the Hittite, who owned the land, named the price of 400 shekels of silver, which he offered to waive, but Abraham came to terms with Ephron and paid him the fair market value for his burial field and cave. So he took possession of the land and buried his wife.

Generations later, Abraham's descendants approached Hittite land with a different attitude. They believed God had personally gifted the land to them (Joshua 1:4), and that they were entitled to take it by force without compensating the residents.

Questions: Why do you think there are two different methods for the transfer of land from one owner to another described in the Bible? What other methods do you see in the Bible? Why do you think Abraham's method was not the method of choice for his descendants?

Which method of land acquisition seems to be most prevalent in our own country? What issues of justice are related to property acquisition, and how might those issues affect decisions about Greenwood and those impacted by the 1921 Tulsa massacre?

For Further Discussion

1. Listen to (recommended) or read an excerpt from the spoken word poem, "We Are the Ones Who Will Be Named," (Video 1:40 -- 7:38) by Korean-American hospital chaplain, J.S. Park. Here is a portion of the poem (a larger excerpt is in the video):

So ... I ask myself constantly:
Am I just a body, a skin that bottles grief?
Am I just a body in vain with no veins,
with no artistry and no arteries,
as if there's no heart in me to bleed?
Were we just bodies buried under the railroad lines we built with our very lives
buried under mines while we were undermined
Are we bodies
overlooked
underrepresented
are we blotted
from history books
Not even an elective
Unfortunately
I know it is easy to believe in the aftermath of tragedy
that it says something
bad of you and me
Traumatic headlines can get trapped in me
and we
feel tragedy
weaving its way in our DNA
until we-get-changed
into hashtags and the headlines of yesterday
Trauma secretly persuades
that you are what has happened to you
that you are what has scarred you
disheartened you
that somehow racism has stained you and tarnished you
But our bodies
you ought to know
We're not meant to be bought and sold
not a commodity to be pigeonholed
I believe we live in a musical instrument called the body,
but that music inside: that's your soul.
You are a soul.
And even souls inside bodies that are broke
Hold a dignity that no one can revoke
Even a mouth with a stolen microphone
Still has a voice that's mighty to behold

How does Park's poem relate to what happened in Tulsa? How does it relate to your own story? to the gospel of Jesus the Christ?

2. The topic of Tulsa does have biblical tones of remembrance, learning of and from the historical experience of ancestors and tribe members. When we forget where we came from or to whom we belong and are accountable (to God), we suffer consequences on earth and even eternally.

Why was it so important to Old Testament leaders to recall and tell the past experiences of the tribes? What outcome was desired? What happened when the tribes forgot, edited, or hid their history?

3. How would you present (or how have you presented) the Tulsa event to young people? What teaching goal would you have when presenting the Tulsa massacre?

4. Comment on this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "There is some controversy about whether American History is patriotic enough, and some states refusing to teach about slavery. The Hebrew scriptures tell us things we don't like, and wish hadn't happened. Sometimes it depicts stories that demonstrate what we ought NOT to do. We should not wipe out populations and then make God take the blame. Take the atrocities that happen in the last couple of chapters of Judges, for example. Do not repeat.

"We should also use our knowledge of history to take a step in a different direction at times. The Korahites are remembered as those who kept some of the bounty after a military victory and got wiped out themselves (Numbers 16). Yet we see them as gatekeepers and song leaders later in the history of the people (1 Chronicles 9:19, 26:1; 2 Chronicles 20:18). Despite past sins, relationships were altered."

5. If you believe your school district is taking the wrong approach to a topic, how would you handle the matter? What difference, if any, might it make to you if you have a child in the school system, if you are taking classes in the district yourself, or if you don't have a strong connection to the school in question?

Responding to the News

To learn more about this historic event, check out the following:

Tulsa Burning: The 1921 Race Massacre, premiering Sunday, May 30, at 8 p.m. ET on The HISTORY Channel.
Dreamland: The Burning of Black Wall Street, which airs on Monday, May 31, and June 5 at 9 p.m. ET on CNN and CNN en Español.

Goin' Back to T-Town, available on American Experience, on PBS

[Commemorating the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre: Community Events and Resources](#)

Prayer

O God, who is faithful and true, help us to call things by their right name.

Help us to call out evil for what it is, not to mollycoddle others or ourselves when we lie, but to be honest about our own proclivity to present ourselves more favorably than we have a right to do.

When we are tempted not to name the brutalized or to misname the traumatized, teach us to tell the truth about them and about what has happened to them, that they may find some measure of healing and justice, and that we may grow hearts of compassion.

In the name of the Christ who is Truth, by the power of the Spirit of Truth, we pray. Amen.

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