

**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 shoeshiner, 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."

## **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.

*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 4:1-16, 25-26**

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the LORD."<sup>2</sup>Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.

<sup>3</sup>In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, <sup>4</sup>and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup>but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

<sup>6</sup>The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? <sup>7</sup>If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

<sup>8</sup>Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.

<sup>9</sup>Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” <sup>10</sup>And the LORD said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! <sup>11</sup>And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. <sup>12</sup>When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

<sup>13</sup>Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! <sup>14</sup>Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.” <sup>15</sup>Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

<sup>16</sup>Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

<sup>25</sup>Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.” <sup>26</sup>To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD.”

### **Hebrews 11:4**

<sup>4</sup>By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks.

*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**

<sup>37</sup>While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. <sup>38</sup>The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. <sup>39</sup>Then the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. <sup>40</sup>You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? <sup>41</sup>So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you. <sup>42</sup>“But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. <sup>43</sup>Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honor in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. <sup>44</sup>Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without

realizing it.”<sup>45</sup> One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too.”<sup>46</sup> And he said, “Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them.”<sup>47</sup> Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed.<sup>48</sup> So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs.<sup>49</sup> Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’<sup>50</sup> so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world,<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.”

***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 1:1-10**

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying,<sup>2</sup> "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites.<sup>3</sup> Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses.<sup>4</sup> From the wilderness and the Lebanon 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.<sup>5</sup> No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.<sup>6</sup> Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them.<sup>7</sup> Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go.<sup>8</sup> This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.<sup>9</sup> I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

<sup>10</sup>Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people,

***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?*